2014-15 PREVIEW

College Basketball

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4. DUKE

BY LUKE WINN AND DAN HANNER

PLUS, *ALL* 351 TEAMS RANKED

Two platoons stocked with one-and-done talent and veteran leaders like **Alex Poythress** will push the Wildcats to a ninth national title.

WORLD SERIES

MADISON BUMGARNER WALKS ALONE AMONG POSTSEASON GIANTS

BY TOM VERDUCCI

NOVEMBER 10, 2014
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2014 | VOLUME 121 | NO. 18

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11.10.14

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NEW IN BLUE
Freshman center Jahlil Okafor will try to erase the bitter memories of Duke's first-round exit last March.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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Sports Illustrated

SI.COM

FOR NOV. 10, 2014

How Tweet It Is

For our fourth annual Twitter 100 we again polled SPORTS ILLUSTRATED staffers—all die-hard Twitter users—and asked which feeds are a must devour. Who are the most humorous, savvy and informative Tweeters in sports? Go to **SI.com/twitter100** to see who among your favorites made the list, which includes athletes and journalists, teams and comedians. And don't forget to follow SI's main feed, @SInow, at **twitter.com/SInow**

Kevin Durant
@KDTrey5
Andrew Luck's snap count would piss me off

Chris Kluwe
@ChrisWarcraft
Ugh. Another worthless AYSO coach encounter. No, sir, "Kick it really hard!" is not teaching those children anything. Congrats on your *win*

Alex Morgan
@alexmorgan13
I wanna know where all the 2nd place T-shirts with "champions" on it go . . . Where do they hide that stuff!!

Adam Schefter
@AdamSchefter
They keep winning, and have been impressive, but Chiefs are still only team in NFL without a receiving touchdown by a wide receiver.

120 SPORTS

To Live And Die In L.A.

120 Sports hosts Tim Doyle and Dave Ross discuss what it will take to fix the struggling Lakers. "The only way is if Jeanie Buss and the Buss family do the right thing and bring in major help before the [Feb. 19] trade deadline," says Ross. Counters Doyle, "That'll never happen. Buss isn't going to bring anyone in. I think **Kobe** is going to get so frustrated with how bad they are that he'll want out of L.A. after this year. . . . Two words, L.A. fans: Anthony Davis." For more of Doyle and Ross's *Point/Counterpoint,* plus 24-hour access to video highlights and analysis, go to **120sports.com**

1 The Hero of San Francisco

For a roundup of last week's 10 most popular stories on SI.com, including Michael Rosenberg's feature on **Madison Bumgarner** and how his left arm brought the Giants another World Series title, go to **SI.com/topstories**

2. **Derrick Rose: The Second Coming**
3. **A Chance for Payback**
4. **Gurley vs. NCAA**
5. **Lin in L.A.**
6. **MLS Playoff Predictions**
7. **A Bittersweet Series**
8. **Under the Radar**
9. **Charles Barkley Q&A**
10. **LeBron James: A Spoiled Homecoming**

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Ole Miss

1 of 3

Leading Off

Hold That Tiger

Despite the best efforts of Ole Miss cornerback Senquez Golson (21), Auburn wide receiver Sammie Coates came down with this reception last Saturday with 13:03 to play and the third-ranked Tigers trailing the No. 4 Rebels by three. Auburn went on to score on the drive and won 35–31, as Coates finished with five receptions for 122 yards and a touchdown. Ole Miss fell to 7–2 (4–2 in the SEC); the Tigers are 7–1 (4–1).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
NELSON CHENAULT
USA TODAY SPORTS

JCS

2 of 3

Leading Off

Bayern Beware

Martin Garcia, aboard Bayern, held off Jamie Spencer, riding Toast of New York (center), by a nose last Saturday to win the richest prize in North American racing, the $5 million Breeders' Cup Classic at Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, Calif. (Victor Espinoza guided Derby and Preakness champ California Chrome to third.) The victory—trainer Bob Baffert's first in 13 Classics—came after a 10-minute inquiry, during which stewards reviewed whether Bayern had impeded 5-2 favorite Shared Belief out of the gate.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
RICHARD MACKSON
USA TODAY SPORTS

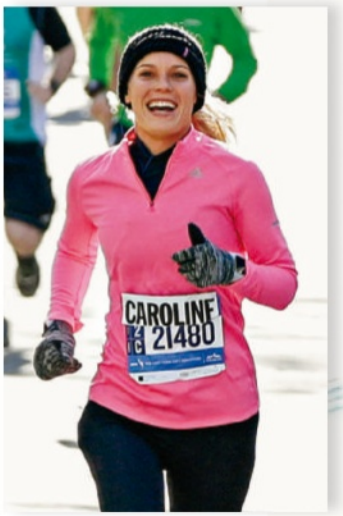
Leading Off

3 of 3

Marathon, Anyone?

Tennis star Caroline Wozniacki was greeted by the world's No. 1 player, Serena Williams, after finishing the New York City Marathon on Sunday. Wozniacki, 24, who had never run more than 13 miles, had hoped to complete the 26.2-mile course in 3:30; she did it in 3:26:33.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JUSTIN LANE
EPA
JOHN ANGELILLO
UPI/LANDOV (INSET)



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HANGIN' WITH ERIC BERRY

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS SAFETY

Eric Berry is not the only member of his family who looked good in Tennessee orange. The Chiefs safety followed in the footsteps of his father, James, a former Volunteers team captain, and now watches his twin brothers, Elliott and Evan, play in Knoxville. Eric talked to Evan Scott Schwartz about his close family, his foundation and his new clothing line.

What was your first favorite sport?
My parents worked a lot, so I spent a lot of time with my grandfather, and he was the first person to start teaching me how to play baseball, swing a bat. He put a golf club in my hand very early. After that, I fell in love with football.

What did your parents do?
My mom worked with a construction firm, and my dad worked at a fiberglass plant. He worked 12-hour shifts, three days on and three days off. He also did interior and exterior painting, and I worked with him a few summers when I was old enough. I learned so much just seeing how much attention to detail he had, the time and effort he put into it, little stuff like that.

Your brothers are seven years younger. Did they bug you when you guys were kids?
You see on TV, when older brothers are like, 'Nah, you can't come with us.' It was never like that with my brothers. Wherever I went, I let them come with me. I wanted them to learn about life the same way my dad brought me up. He exposed me to things that helped me in life today, and I wanted to do the same thing.

Your Eric Berry Foundation sets up tutoring and afterschool programs.
Yes, and this year we gave away 500 backpacks with good, quality materials inside. It wasn't just a notebook and two pencils. They had glue, scissors, good name-brand things that these kids can use and be proud of, and want to do good work with. We had one lady this year who had seven kids. Imagine going school shopping for seven kids! That's a big chunk of your money. That's a lot of stress we relieved from that family so she can put that money toward food, gas—whatever she needed to help them out.

What can you tell me about the football camps you run?
The camps we do are free. We don't make the families pay $200, $300. No! Bring your kids out here! If we have space, you can come. [Laughs] We have people come talk about different career paths as well, not just football. My parents always told us whatever we do, they'll support us as long as we do it to the best of our ability.

You're also getting into fashion. How did that happen?
"Nonchalant" is the name of our clothing line. It revolves around ignoring the things that set you back. You have to be focused on your main goals. So in a world full of chaos, we remain nonchalant. I'm interested in a lot of things. I love fashion because that's how people express themselves. I also like technology—I have a productivity app that I've been working on for two years and should be done soon. I just happen to play football, and I make sure I balance it out pretty well.

THE BERRY FILE

Age: **25**
Hometown: **Fairburn, Ga.**
College: **Tennessee**
Motto: **"Know thyself."**

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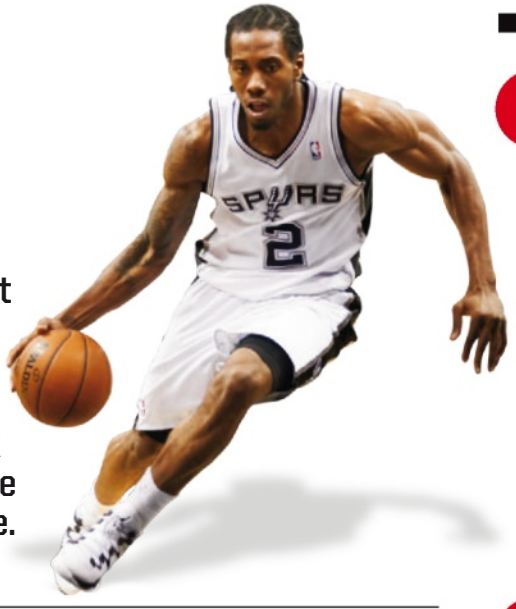
INBOX

FOR OCT. 27, 2014



In an era when many athletes can't wait to boast about themselves, it's refreshing to see Kawhi Leonard shun the spotlight. Leonard lets his game and work ethic speak for themselves. More athletes should follow his example.

Rick Bueti, Chappaqua, N.Y.

While glancing over your NBA preview I kept thinking, when is the league going to expand? There's plenty of talent to go around to create a new team, and no city deserves one more than Seattle. Fans supported the **SuperSonics** for 41 years and would do so again in a heartbeat. I, like many other fans in the area, no longer pay much attention to the NBA but I would if a new team is placed in Seattle.

William E. Gurney, Burlington, Wash.

In contrast to former LSU coach Dale Brown's recruitment of Arvydas Sabonis, Don Nelson actually went to Lithuania to recruit Sarunas Marciulionis for the Warriors in 1988, even staying with the Marciulionis family.

Alfred E. Senn, Madison, Wis.

By identifying one of the four Oklahoma students who studies in the library during Sooners football games as only "one of whom naps on a couch," you've given all students a great excuse: "Yes, Mom and Dad, that was me! I study so much that I have to sleep at the library."

Dan Palmer, Bartlett, Ill.

COVER

I was looking forward to this year's NBA preview, wondering what member of the world champion Spurs would grace the cover. Instead, I got three guys who play for a team that went 33-49 last year. And people wonder why San Antonio plays with a chip on its shoulder?

Harlan Thacker
Worcester, Mass.

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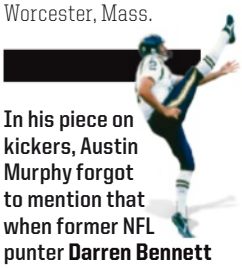

In his piece on kickers, Austin Murphy forgot to mention that when former NFL punter Darren Bennett was the last man for the kicking team, he not only attempted to tackle the returner but also to stand him up and drive him back a few yards.

Bruce Smith
Ventura, Calif.

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POINT AFTER

Michael Rosenberg was remiss for failing to include Ben Affleck in his essay about celebrities who are great sports fans. As a Red Sox fan, Affleck's refusal to wear a Yankees cap for a scene in his latest movie, *Gone Girl*, should put him at the top of the list.

Ray Grasso
Wethersfield, Conn.

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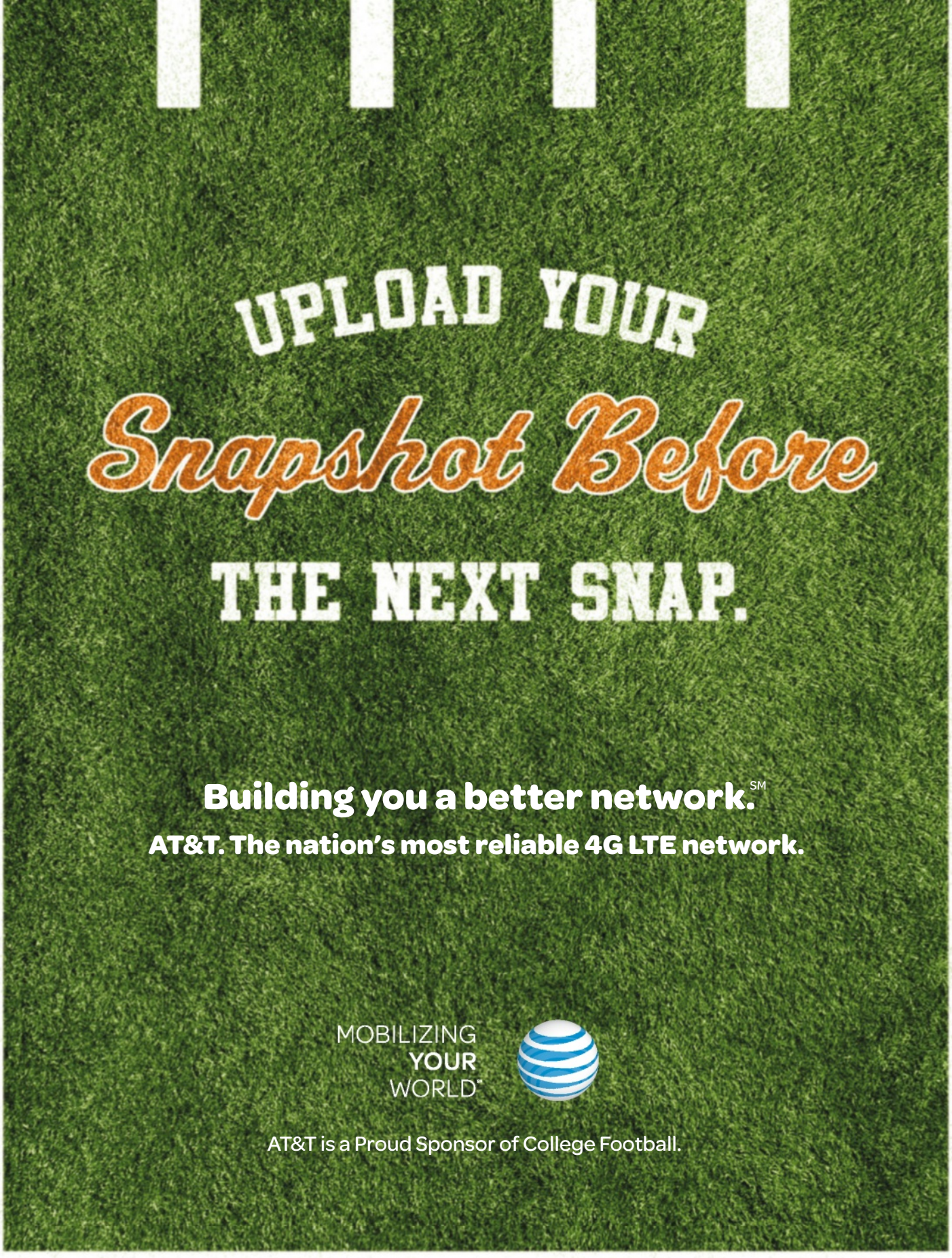

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+ Scorecard

Edited by / JIM GORANT / TED KEITH

Domino Effect

Former corporate CEO Dave Brandon's arrival at Michigan was supposed to herald a new era for athletic directors but instead brought about new lows for a storied program

BY ANDY STAPLES

DAVE BRANDON didn't wind up "resigning" in his fifth season as Michigan's athletic director last Friday because he dared to propose shooting off fireworks at Michigan Stadium. The former Wolverines defensive end and Domino's Pizza chairman and CEO didn't get pushed out just for jacking up the prices on student tickets after eliminating priority seating for upperclassmen. Nor did Brandon hit the bricks solely because his handpicked head coach hasn't won enough games or because Brandon liked to watch film with coaches on Sundays and suggest strategy.

All of those factors conspired to spell doom for Brandon, who tried to run Michigan's athletic department the way he had run Domino's: He was a marketing guy in a performance business. He learned the hard way that you can't treat fans—especially those of a team that is falling short of expectations—like the consumers of $10 pizzas. Hungry cheese lovers look for the best deal, and they might be swayed to your offering by a $2 discount or a new crust stuffed with bacon or marshmallow. But college football fans, many of whom are born into their fandom—or paid dearly for it through tuition—operate differently. Brandon reportedly responded to emails from angry fans by suggesting they find another school for which to root, one of many indicators that he didn't *get* college football. He failed to understand that rooting for Michigan and not Ohio State is not the same as choosing

Domino's over Pizza Hut.

Fans of one of the nation's most hallowed football programs are already loyal to the bone. Their allegiance isn't deepened by a new uniform or a jazzier in-stadium experience. Michigan supporters were insulted by a rescinded promotion to give away two tickets to the Minnesota game with the purchase of two bottles of Coke. (Tickets many had spent hundreds on were suddenly worth less than a few bottles of soda?) Fans are customers, but they're also invested—emotionally as much as financially. They buy history and tradition and success. They want a winner.

So what now? Who can Michigan hire to build back trust and replace Brady Hoke with a coach who will win more? The modern AD must be an excellent fund-raiser, and he also must understand how to straddle the line between modernizing the operation and changing it so drastically that fans no longer get that surge of school spirit when they see the players slap the GO BLUE banner on the way to the field. At the same time the best ADs also know enough about football and basketball to hire winning coaches in the two revenue sports.

Michigan's hiring of Brandon in 2010 represents one extreme of the continuum between the grizzled ex-coach AD and the plucked-from-corporate-America AD. CEOs with backgrounds in low-priced consumables may have run nine-figure organizations, but being an AD requires more than management skills. The best private-sector equivalent is a good casino head, because he or she would understand how to appease the whales (big-money boosters) while also keeping the $10 blackjack tables full. This isn't to suggest that Michigan, which chose former Steelcase CEO and near Brandon clone Jim Hackett as its interim AD, should hire the guy running Caesars Palace any more than the one atop Little Caesars. But the school should be looking for someone with that breadth of skill.

Lucky for UM, there are plenty of people already working in college athletics with the proper management toolbox. While Arkansas athletic director Jeff Long, a former Wolverines administrator and football graduate assistant, is a Michigan Man, school president Mark S. Schlissel, who came to Ann Arbor from Brown in July, wisely says that such connections aren't a prerequisite for the job. Long is a great candidate, but there's no need to narrow the applicant pool. Northwestern's Jim Phillips has emerged as an early favorite. Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione is the gold standard, and any school would be lucky to have him if he were interested. Kansas State's John Currie, who modernized that athletic department without taking away its charm, has the skills. So does TCU's Chris Del Conte, who raised enough money for a stadium rebuild in a down economy.

Michigan is too proud of an athletic program to wallow long. Football can reclaim its place in the upper echelon of college sports quickly with the correct hire. Schlissel seems to understand what is required. If any candidate suggests free bread sticks with the purchase of a football ticket, chances are the interview will be over. □

TONY DING/AP (BRANDON, 2); AARON M. SPRECHER/AP (BRADY); STEVEN SENNE/AP (MANNING); NICOLE WARING/GETTY IMAGES (STICK); ERICK W. RASCO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (RULER); IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES (GAVEL); DAVID DOW/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (MUTOMBO)

+ GO FIGURE

11–5

Tom Brady's head-to-head record against **Peyton Manning** after the Patriots' 43–21 win over the Broncos on Sunday. Despite the loss, Manning set an NFL record with his 14th career 400-yard passing game.

18

Consecutive shootout losses for the Devils, an NHL record that they finally broke last Thursday with a 2–1 win over the Jets. New Jersey's last shootout win, on March 10, 2013, also came against Winnipeg.

3/4

Width, in inches, of the wire strung between two Chicago skyscrapers that daredevil Nik Wallenda walked across twice on Sunday. Wallenda worked without a harness or safety net and did the second walk blindfolded.

50

Years for which Ricardo Ferreira, a defender in a fourth-division soccer league in Switzerland, has been suspended after a postmatch incident on May 25 in which he kicked a ball in a referee's face and sprayed him with water.

4:48:09

Finish time in the New York City Marathon by a 24-man relay team of NBA personalities. Former All-Star **Dikembe Mutombo** ran the anchor.

SUGAR BOWL

❶ FLORIDA STATE

The Seminoles leapfrog the Bulldogs after a road escape against a quality Louisville team. The rise of freshman tailback **Dalvin Cook** adds a new dimension to the offense, but with quarterback Jameis Winston hobbled by a right-ankle injury, FSU's line better shore up its pass blocking.

TCU ❹

If TCU can beat Kansas State on Saturday—the only team in the Big 12 without a conference loss—the Horned Frogs have an excellent chance of winning the league. TCU should knock off Kansas, Texas and Iowa State, but the tough, well-coached Wildcats could prove to be their downfall.

SI PLAYOFF PREDICTION NOV. 3

BY ANDY STAPLES

From now through the Dec. 15 issue Staples will assess which teams should make college football's final four.

❷ MISSISSIPPI STATE

Arkansas put a scare into one of the SEC's best, but the Bulldogs prevailed 17-10. Mississippi State will waste everyone's time by playing Tennessee-Martin at home on Saturday, then the Bulldogs will go to Tuscaloosa on Nov. 15 and try to prove themselves once and for all.

OREGON ❸

The Ducks' banged-up offensive line looked better in a 45-16 rout of Stanford last Saturday, and quarterback **Marcus Mariota** performed like the nation's best player. But right tackle Matt Pierson injured the MCL in his left knee and could miss Saturday's game at No. 17 Utah.

ROSE BOWL

Last week:
Mississippi State, Florida State, Oregon, TCU

THEY SAID IT **"Oh, hell no, now I'm fat *and* poor."**

Charles Barkley, recalling his reaction after gaining 20 pounds in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade the thrift-minded Sixers from taking him in the 1984 draft.

LAST WISH FULFILLED

Even when **Lauren Hill** was diagnosed with a rare brain cancer in November 2013, shortly after committing to Division III Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, she still dreamed of playing college basketball. But in September she learned she had only months to live, and Hill, 19, feared she wouldn't make it to the Lions' opener against Hiram on Nov. 15. In an effort to help Hill achieve her dream, the NCAA granted a scheduling exemption, and the teams moved the game up to Sunday. Hill scored four points—the first and last baskets—in a 66-55 win. "To touch this many people is amazing," Hill said on Fox Sports during the game. "We can get research going to cure this cancer. I won't be around to see that, but it's going to help so many people." And she's not done yet. Hill added, "Let's not call this my last game. This is my first collegiate game."
–Stephanie Apstein

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (COOK); TONY GUTIERREZ/AP (TREVONE BOYKIN); BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES (MARIOTA); SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JOSH ROBINSON); TOM UHLMAN/AP (HILL); JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BARKLEY)

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PRO-FILES
+
Star Chores

David Eckstein's postbaseball life started in outer space

BY ALBERT CHEN

DAVID ECKSTEIN ALWAYS seemed a little out of place in the baseball world. He was listed, generously, at 5' 7", 175 pounds, and seemed closer in stature to the batboys than to his peers. He crowded the plate in a low, wobbly crouch while choking up nearly three inches, and he fielded his position with even less grace: a shortstop and second baseman, he didn't throw the baseball as much as shot-put it, as if every toss across the diamond required the physical effort of scaling Kilimanjaro. "My arm looks *terrible*," says Eckstein, now 39 and four years into retirement. "I still hate watching myself throw on old highlights."

The numbers from his itinerant 10-year major league career tell the story of a solid and steady, if not spectacular, infielder: 1,414 hits, .280 career average, five teams, two All-Star elections and two World Series rings (one with the Angels in 2002, the other with the Cardinals in '06, when he was Series MVP). But the story of Eck—the one about a 19th-round draft pick out of the University of Florida in 1997 who became something of a baseball folk hero—was always told not with statistics but with adjectives from *The Little Engine That Could*. It's the tale of the undersized overachiever who, by sheer effort and determination, overcame his

HERO WORSHIP David and Ashley dress for success in their *Alice in Wonderland*–themed dining room, which serves as Ashley's office.

SI.COM To watch a video on David Eckstein, or the entire Pro-Files video series, go to ***si.com/pro-files***

limitations and made it to the big leagues.

If his career in baseball was unconventional and surprising, his postplaying life is turning out to be even more so. After an injury-plagued final season with the Padres in 2010, he received multiple contract offers (he even got a call from one team in '12, after a year away from the game), but he wanted to turn his full attention to the business that he and his wife, Ashley, had founded in '10. Her Universe, a company that produces a fashion and accessories line for female sci-fi fans, was Ashley's brainchild, and it was entering what Eckstein saw as its make-or-break third year. Says Eckstein, "After all the years of her making my career a priority, it was time to make hers a priority."

Yes, their husbands are paid well, but baseball wives still get a raw deal. Their spouses are on the road half the time for all but four months of the year. Even when they're home, they work nights and weekends and sleep late. Two years after the Ecksteins were married in 2005, Ashley took a step back from her on-camera acting career—she'd appeared in small roles in film and TV—to move wherever David's career took him, from St. Louis to Toronto to Arizona to San Diego. As she hopscotched around the country, she landed a gig doing voice-overs on the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* playing the character Ahsoka Tano.

David jokes that she came up with the idea for Her Universe "because Ashley wanted a T-shirt," though it's not much of an exaggeration. After beginning work on *The Clone Wars*, Ashley noticed that almost all of the apparel for the *Star Wars* franchise was designed for men. Using actress Alyssa Milano's successful business designing and creating MLB merchandise for women as a model, Ashley did some research. She found that close to half of all sci-fi fans are women, as are 45% of sci-fi convention-goers. "Eighty-five percent of all consumer purchases are [made by] women," she says. "So why *wouldn't* you give us something to buy?"

Ashley asked that question while sitting in a conference room in a warehouse in the San Fernando Valley. The Ecksteins live in central Florida, but the company is based out of the New York and L.A. offices of The Araca Group, their corporate partner. Most of the small group of about 10 people who design and produce Her Universe merchandise work out of the L.A. office. Sitting at her side was her husband and business partner, who matched her enthusiasm and finished her sentences.

Dressed in jeans and sneakers, the pair resembled extras from the set of *Glee*, and they might be just as unlikely to run a successful business. Before they started Her Universe, neither had any background in business or even imagined that they would be entrepreneurs one day. Ashley's career had been spent in front of cameras. David's only business venture did not exactly secure his future: In 2006, fresh off his World Series MVP, he partnered with a food company to start his own brand of cereal. A few months after Eckso's! went on sale, Eckstein was in a supermarket in St. Louis when he saw boxes of the cereal . . . in the discount aisle. He brought a box to the checkout counter, and the cashier said, "When are these athletes going to learn that this stuff just doesn't work?"

Sci-fi merchandise—T-shirts, dresses, hats, scarves, hoodies—for fangirls may sound as doomed as Eckso's!,

FIELD WORK Eckstein overachieved during a 10-year career that included a World Series MVP with the Cardinals in 2006.

but Her Universe has been more successful than the Ecksteins could have imagined. It's grown into a multimillion-dollar business, and it's expanding.

"Similar to David's career, we really had to defy the doubters and defy the odds," Ashley says. "The giants in the industry, they wanted to squash us." At the outset Ashley approached LucasFilm about a licensing deal, but the company told her no. Twice. It was only after she partnered with The Araca Group, a large brand management company, that LucasFilm took her seriously, eventually granting her licensing rights. Her Universe now includes merchandise from

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THE LOOK OF HER UNIVERSE +

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COSTUME PARTY Ashley models a few outfits designed to appeal to the 45% of sci-fi conventioneers who are women.

KELSEY EDWARDS (3)

Marvel, *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who* and *The Walking Dead*, among others. The bulk of the Ecksteins' time is spent in meetings with potential partners as they seek new licenses. Says Ashley, "Once David retired, it was unreal. I didn't realize it, but I did need his help. He isn't in on every call, but he's in on all the financial decisions and comes to all the big meetings. If we have a new deal, he's my closer."

While Ashley is a cult celebrity for her role in *The Clone Wars*, in its seventh season, David is truly an alien in the sci-fi world. At conventions, where Ashley is hounded by autograph-seekers, David stays in the background. When he's pulled into conversations with fans who have no idea that they are talking to a former major leaguer, Eckstein tries to hold his own. At his first convention he called a light saber from *Star Wars* a life saver. "That was mortifying," says Ashley. Says David, of fitting in, "It is getting easier. I was once having this conversation with this guy about how excited he was to go play Dungeons and Dragons in the basement. He kept referring to LARPing"—live action role playing—"and let's just say the conversation was very quiet from my end. Now? I know all about it. It's funny, LARPing in the basement may sound strange to a lot of people but when you boil it down, it's really the same thing as playing fantasy football—you tell someone who's not a sports fan what you do, and they're like, *You draft what and you do what?* The two worlds don't really mix, they would never admit that they're alike in any way, but with the level of passion, they're exactly the same."

He is not yet spending his nights LARPing, but Eckstein clearly enjoys his new life, immersed in Her Universe. The business part of the job feeds the competitive side of him. "Playing for managers like Tony La Russa and Mike Scioscia, they break down games and they foresee something that may be a 1% possibility, but they've already thought that through," he says. "To take that to the business world when you're trying to launch your own company—to try to explore and think out every possible outcome—has been invaluable."

Still Eckstein's true love remains baseball. At the warehouse—while Ashley was on a conference call—he was far more interested in talking about the pennant races than the new season of *Doctor Who*, touching on every baseball topic from bean balls ("The game is best when it's policed by the players") to the rise of statheads.

Eckstein volunteers as a coach at local high schools and for Team USA baseball, and it seems inevitable that sooner or later he will be back in baseball full time, likely as a front-office executive. "I'm waiting for that call," says Ashley, "when a team comes calling and I say, *You have to take that job.*"

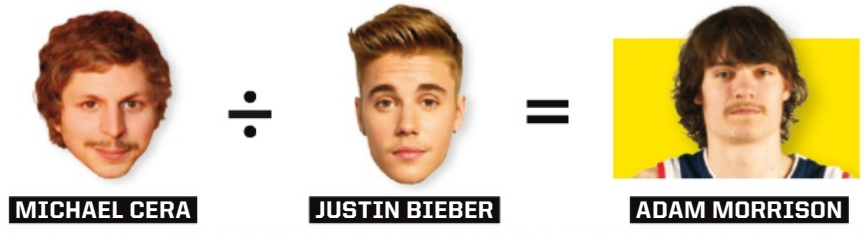
At the moment, though, David and Ashley have a business to run. They still see their company as the little T-shirt operation that could. What fuels David in his baseball afterlife is not unlike what motivated him all those years in the game. "The one thing you should not tell us is no—that we can't do something," he says. "Because we'll do everything we can to prove you wrong. That's the story of my life." □

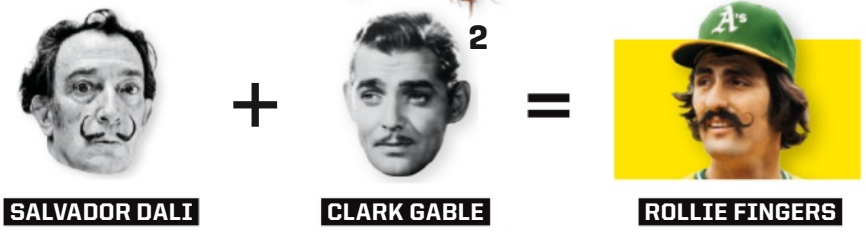
While Ashley is a cult celebrity for her role in *The Clone Wars*, David is an alien in the sci-fi world. **At conventions she is hounded by autograph-seekers, and he stays in the background.**

EXTRA MUSTARD

Mustache Math

Movember, the annual mustache-growing fund- and awareness-raiser for men's health issues, is upon us. In celebration, here are a few of the more notorious 'staches in sports broken down into their primary elements





SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Heat forward Josh McRoberts **tore his own jersey in anger** after missing a rebound in a win over the Raptors last Sunday and had to come out of the game.

BREAKOUT PERFORMER

HOT

Kevin Youkilis

The Greek god of walks saunters into the sunset. Farewell to a hard-nosed grinder whose 11-year career was based on balls.

Rosie Napravnik

She won the Breeders' Cup Distaff then announced she was pregnant. She was riding for $2 million—and for two.

NASCAR Fights

Jeff Gordon and Brad Keselowski had the second postrace scuffle in a month. They're not staged, but Vince McMahon would be at home on pit road.

Joe Maddon

He's going backward. Guys in their 60s are supposed to ditch the losers and move to Florida.

Russell Westbrook

Given the chance to prove he's more than Kevin Durant's righthand man, he broke his right hand.

NOT

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SCORECARD

Marquez Jackson-Allen | *Mamaroneck, N.Y.* | *Football*

Marquez, a Mamaroneck High senior running back, rushed 29 times for 240 yards and three touchdowns to beat Scarsdale High 45–20 in a Class 2A quarterfinal, the program's first state tournament win. This year he set a school single-game rushing mark (305 yards) and is averaging 9.35 yards per carry.

Rhamat Alhassan | *Glenarden, Md.* | *Volleyball*

A 6' 4" freshman middle blocker at Florida, Alhassan led the team in blocks for the 19th time this season with five in a 3–0 sweep of Georgia. Through week's end she was third in NCAA hitting percentage (.463). Competing for the junior national team in July, she was the 20-and-under Continental Championships MVP.

Danny Rayl | *Carmel, Ind.* | *Tennis*

Danny, a senior at Park Tudor School, defended his state title with a 6–2, 6–0 victory over Sam Concannon of Culver Academy. Danny won the Indiana doubles championship as a freshman and has not lost in singles since the state final in his sophomore year. He has verbally committed to Notre Dame.

Faces in the Crowd

→ | *Edited by* ALEXANDRA FENWICK

Anna Redding | *Concord, N.C.* | *Golf*

A senior at Cannon School, Anna fired a five-under 139 to win the North Carolina independent schools' 3A championship by seven shots, leading the Cougars to their fourth straight title. Anna, who raised $20,050 for a Kenyan hospital by making 63 birdies this season, has verbally committed to Virginia.

Austin Gerber | *Churchville, N.Y.* | *Soccer*

Gerber, a senior forward at D-III Keuka College in Keuka Park, N.Y., scored five times in a 6–1 win over Penn State–Berks to set Wolfpack records for single-game goals and season points. The Northeastern Athletic Conference player of the year led all NCAA divisions in goals (26) and points (58) at week's end.

Cherie Gruenfeld | *Cathedral City, Calif.* | *Triathlon*

Gruenfeld, 70, set the 70-to-74 women's age-group course record at the Ironman world championship in Kona, Hawaii, finishing in 14:09:13 to smash the old mark by 1:10.06. She had won the Ironman 70.3-mile world title at Mont Tremblant, Que., in September, achieving the full- and half-Ironman "double."

Nominate Now ▼

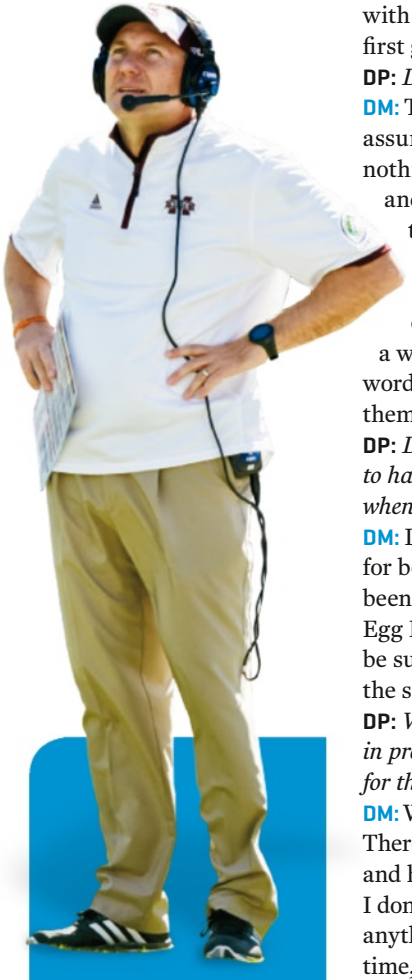
To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

SADIE POPOLI (JACKSON-ALLEN); TIM CASEY/UAA COMMUNICATIONS (ALHASSAN); JULIA ENKEMA (RAYL); COURTESY OF ANDREA IGEL (REDDING); JOHN BOCCACINO (GERBER); LEE GRUENFELD (GRUENFELD)

Just My Type

→ *Interview by* **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *What's the coolest thing in your office?*
DAN MULLEN: It's gotta be the pictures of my kids. The fans probably wouldn't think that's cool. I do have a couple of national championship rings.
DP: *When's the last time you put on the rings?*
DM: I don't because I didn't win them at Mississippi State. I'd only wear one that I won at Mississippi State.
DP: *Getting used to being No. 1?*
DM: I tell you what, it's better than being No. 2.
DP: *Have you talked with your former boss Urban Meyer about the pressure of being No. 1?*
DM: I was fortunate being [offensive coordinator under] Urban at Florida when we had a lot of attention. We had a Heisman Trophy winner in Tim Tebow. We won two national championships in three years. The biggest thing I got out of it: Remember what got you there. Enjoy the hype and the attention, but make sure the focus doesn't change from what got you there in the first place because it will all disappear.
DP: *What did you think of the cowbells when you were at Florida?*
DM: I spent four years at Florida, and Mississippi State was one of the schools [in the SEC] we did not visit. My first game at Davis-Wade Stadium with the cowbells was my first game as head coach.
DP: *Do you hate Ole Miss?*
DM: That's a pretty fair assumption. There's nothing personal. I know and recruited a lot of their players. I know their coaches. I think it's more a dislike of the institution as a whole. And I don't use words like that. We just call them the school up north.
DP: *Don't you want Ole Miss to have a good record when you face them?*
DM: I would have loved for both teams to have been undefeated for the Egg Bowl. That would be such a special deal for the state of Mississippi.
DP: *What role do you play in promoting Dak Prescott for the Heisman?*
DM: We're pretty fortunate. There's so much attention and hype that gets out there. I don't think we have to do anything. I tell him all the time, if he likes the attention, keep playing well and help us win. If he doesn't, go out and throw a couple of interceptions and everyone will leave him alone.
DP: *When's the last time you yelled at Prescott?*
DM: Yesterday at practice I probably yelled at him three or four times. I have a pretty high standard. It's a friendly yell. I would call it loud constructive criticism. □



DAN MULLEN

RINGING SUCCESS

Mississippi State's sixth-year coach is a favorite of the Bulldogs' cowbell-crazy fans for leading the school to a 8–0 record and its first No. 1 ranking, but a showdown at rival Ole Miss looms on Nov. 29.

Guest Shots

Say What?

I asked **Joe Montana** how his game would translate to today's NFL. "If I was playing [now], I'd have to be like Peyton or Brady because I couldn't move," Montana said. "I might be able to beat both of them now [in the 40]." . . . Ole Miss senior quarterback **Bo Wallace** doesn't

like the Good Bo, Bad Bo moniker bestowed upon him for his perceived up-and-down play. "You can call any quarterback *Bad So and So, Good So and So* during a game," Wallace said. "It's part of playing quarterback. For me to be the only one that's happened to, it's pretty annoying." . . . Michigan State junior quarterback **Connor Cook** is starting to get some attention from

NFL draft analysts, but he told me he has no intention of forgoing his senior season. "Who wants to leave college?" Cook said. "College is fun."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MULLEN); BRAD MANGIN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MONTANA); JONATHAN BACHMAN/AP (WALLACE); ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (COOK)

The Case for . . .
Royals Fans

BY STEVE RUSHIN

For the next four weeks The Case for . . . *will feature a Sportsman of the Year candidate. Find more nominees at SI.com/sportsman*

HIROO ONODA WAS a Japanese soldier who remained at his jungle post on Lubang Island in the Philippines for 29 years after World War II ended, unaware that his nation had surrendered and oblivious to the march of time.

Onoda's continued existence came as a revelation to his long-retired commanding officer, who met with the soldier in 1974—decades after he was declared dead—and formally relieved him of his duty. Onoda wore the same uniform he had in 1945, though it was in tatters, when he returned to Tokyo, blinking in disbelief at the skyscrapers and automobiles he saw there.

Twenty-nine years is a long time to be dead. The world was reminded of that when Onoda died—for real—in Tokyo, aged 91, last Jan. 16, which happened to be the 57th birthday of Steve (Bye-Bye) Balboni, the former slugger of the 1985 Kansas City Royals. The Royals won the World Series that season, but spent the next 29 years in oblivion, dutifully making the rounds of the American League, wearing more or less the same uniforms they always had, unaware that their efforts were pointless and that they had long ago surrendered.

Or had they? On a Tuesday night at the end of August, the Royals found themselves 1½ games in front of the Tigers in the American League Central after beating the Twins with an Alex Gordon walk-off homer in front of 13,847 witnesses, most of them Kansas Citians who suspected this team might be alive after all.

Manager Ned Yost expressed his disappointment that more believers hadn't shown up, when in fact it was a marvel that so many had. From April through September, an average of 24,154 people came to Kauffman Stadium, waiting at the jungle's edge, inexplicably devoted to duty. And then the Royals emerged from the wilderness, a little dazed, into the blazing light of autumn. They were unmistakably alive. A nation gasped, then applauded.

The wild-card game, which the Royals won against the A's, didn't exist in 1985. The night they beat the Angels to clinch the ALDS—another modern invention—Comedy Central was airing *Hot Tub Time Machine*, about high school buddies who travel back to 1986, when the Royals were reigning world champs and the world was evidently filled with enormous satellite phones and something called wine coolers.

> Royals fans came anyway in an act of faith or madness **or simple devotion to duty.**

The world had changed while the Royals were off the grid (starting with the fact that there wasn't really a grid in 1985) but their fans continued turning up, as if nothing had happened. And that was the problem: Nothing had happened. Royals fans came anyway—never fewer than 1.2 million in a season, usually many more—in an act of faith or madness or (here comes that phrase again) simple devotion to duty. That's why those fans are my Sportsmen and Women of the Year. They maintained this bedside vigil, day after day for decades, in the fading hope that the patient would stir.

And then it stirred. By the bottom of the ninth in Game 7 last week, with leftfielder Alex Gordon standing on third and the winning run at the plate, those fans were one pitch from bliss. A group described as "long-suffering" for 29 years hadn't suffered deeply. Prolonged losing becomes a general anesthesia. Then catcher Salvador Perez popped a foul ball that Giants third baseman Pablo Sandoval settled under. The anesthesia began to wear off.

Like Hiroo Onoda, Gordon was stranded on his island, unable to get home. When Onoda returned to life (and to Tokyo) after 29 years, he received a hero's welcome. The Royals have too, a reward from—but also for—those fans who remained vigilant against all reason. Duty or folly, Royals fans now know the truth of what Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: "There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy." □

WILLIAM PURNELL/ICON SPORTSWIRE

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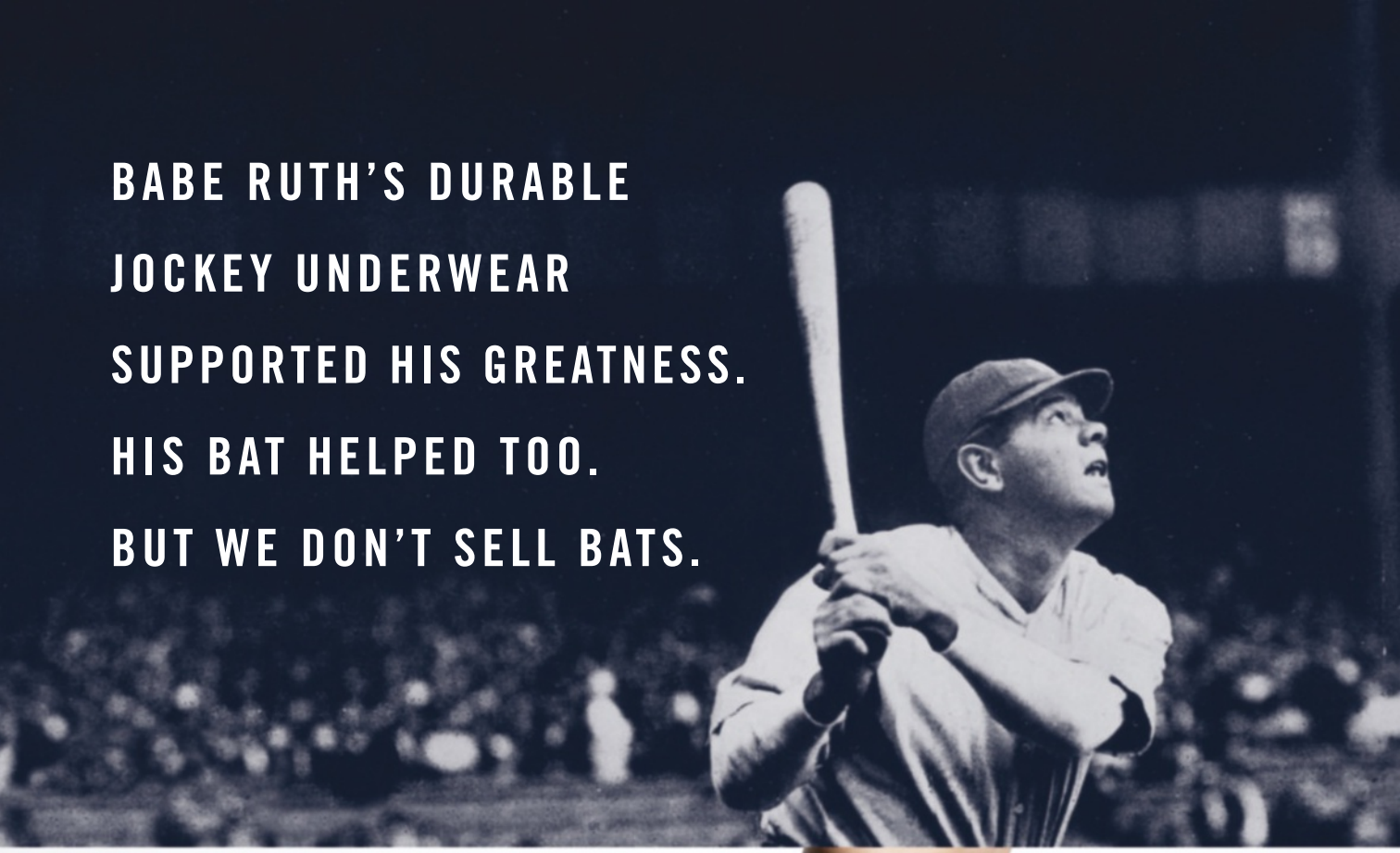

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WORLD SERIES

Madison Bumgarner came as close to winning the World Series single-handedly as anyone could. But the bedrock of the San Francisco championships is a manager-front office relationship that's as stable as it is sublime

Continuity PRINCIPA

BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photograph by
Deanne Fitzmaurice
For Sports Illustrated

+

CAN'T RAIN ON THIS PARADE
Bumgarner stood apart this year, and he's one of the few Giants who have been part of all three World Series celebrations since 2010.

LS
WORLD SERIES

GIANTS GENERAL manager Brian Sabean and manager Bruce Bochy live in the same building near AT&T Park in San Francisco, which is a convenience on the many nights they get together in Sabean's office near the Giants' clubhouse after a game. Sometimes Bochy waits for a lull in the conversation—his cue to muster up a "Well, gotta go. . . ."—but the opening never comes. It might be four o'clock in the morning before the last story is told and the last glass is emptied.

"We have the luxury of not driving, of just walking across the street," Bochy says. "We'll sit there and talk about baseball and other things, not just the game. Brian is a great storyteller, and when he gets on a roll there is no stopping him. It's usually about 1:30, 2 o'clock when the [George] Steinbrenner stories start to come. And then you know you'll be there a while."

Lee Elder, one of Sabean's senior advisers and like his boss an émigré from Steinbrenner's Yankees, often sits in on the spirited chats, which are addenda to the usual pre- and postgame visits of Sabean and his longtime advisers. "My office is open to them," Bochy says. "Managing to me is so much easier or so much more difficult depending on your relationship with the general manager. When you have the relationship we do, it allows you the freedom to say what you want."

Says Giants president Larry Baer, "Nothing is more important in sports than the relationship between the general manager and the manager or coach. It works here because they respect each other. Boch can have a say in acquisitions and Sabes can have a say in lineups. They know the other one has the final decision, but they know their opinion is respected."

Last week the Giants became the first National League team in seven decades to win a third World Series in five seasons, holding off the Royals to win a thrilling Game 7 with the tying run on third base. San Francisco ace Madison Bumgarner, 270 innings deep into his season, nailed down not just the last out but also the 14 before that, all on two days of rest after his second win of the Series as a starter. It was the stuff of instant legend.

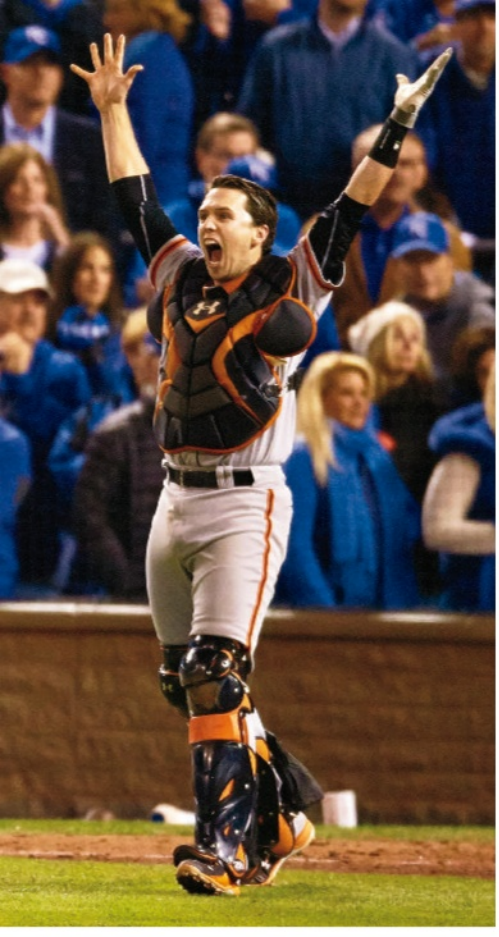
Sabean, 58, and Bochy, 59, are the winning team within the winning team, two gray-haired baseball wise guys with weak spots for black open-collar shirts and players who care as much about winning as they do. The 2014 Giants, an 88-win regular-season team, will be remembered more for their will than their greatness. In winning their three World Series, Sabean and Bochy have kept constant only one spot among the eight everyday players (catcher Buster Posey) and only one spot among the four starting pitchers (Bumgarner). And yet the strings they pull and the levers they throw keep producing the same results in October. When facing elimination San Francisco is 8–0, while outscoring the opponent 47–11. They don't know when to quit.

A FINE PAIR
Sabean hired Bochy in 2006, and along the way they developed Bumgarner and Posey (top) and became friends on the road to championships in (from left) 2010, '12 and '14.

SABEAN AND BOCHY became a tandem after the 2006 season, even though Bochy still had one year remaining on his contract to manage the Padres and Sabean didn't know Bochy personally. Sabean is both demanding and fiercely loyal, traits he picked up from Steinbrenner while running the Yankees' scouting department from 1986 to '92. (Sabean picked up more than those traits; he secretly dated Steinbrenner's secretary, who became his first wife.) He saw how Steinbrenner kept his staff on a competitive edge. At any moment he might call upon you for an opinion or a solution, which meant you had to be prepared at all times. Winning was stressed at every level of the minors, so everyone learned how to deal with pressure.

The Yankees fielded losing teams every year from 1989 through '92, their only stretch of four straight losing seasons since they became the Yankees in 1913. (Steinbrenner was banned from baseball for the last 2½ of those seasons.) But at the time, the organization was also an incubator of playing talent and bright minds. The group would not only create a dynasty in New York but also influence the rest of baseball. In the New York organization in '92 alone were future general managers Sabean and Brian Cashman; future managers Don Mattingly, Brad Ausmus and Trey Hillman; rookie manager Buck

FROM LEFT: BRAD MANGIN/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; MATT SLOCUM/AP; AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



Showalter; future coaches Torey Lovullo, Hensley Meulens, Curt Young, Gary Denbo, Roberto Kelly, Mike Gallego and Brian Butterfield; and future world champions Mariano Rivera, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada and Derek Jeter. All four of those key players were signed while Sabean was in charge of scouting.

Sabean joined the Giants after the 1992 season as assistant to GM Bob Quinn. Many of Sabean's key cabinet members today were with him in the Yankees' organization: Meulens, the Giants' hitting coach; pitching coach Dave Righetti; Kelly, the first base coach; assistant hitting coach Joe Lefebvre; assistant GM Dick Tidrow; special assistant J.T. Snow; pro scouts Steve Balboni and Brian Johnson; Elder; and senior adviser Paul Turco.

"If you get a chance and he lets his guard down, Brian talks a lot about Steinbrenner," Johnson says. "He'll say, 'We're like the Yankees of the West.' The Yankees weren't very good in the late '80s and early '90s, but we were loaded with talent, especially in the coaching ranks. They taught baseball the way it was supposed to be played."

Sabean's gift for valuing opinion is evident in the loyalty from the people who

"It's usually about 1:30, 2 o'clock when the Steinbrenner stories start to come," says Bochy of his postgame chats with Sabean. **"And then you know you'll be there a while."**

surround him. "This is my seventh year," said assistant general manager John Barr, "and I'm the most junior guy around."

Sabean's roster is full of longtime Giants: vice president of pro scouting Jeremy Shelley (21 years), Tidrow (20), assistant GM Bobby Evans (21), director of player development Shane Turner (19), Elder (15), Righetti (15) and director of quantitative analysis Yeshayah Goldfarb (14).

Balboni, Lefebvre and scout Stan Saleski went all the way back with Sabean to their playing days at Eckerd College. Saleski was a legendary amateur pitcher who once matched Mark Fidrych for 12 innings in a double no-hitter in a Massachusetts American Legion game—until Fidrych finally won in the 13th, 1–0. Saleski hurt his arm as a senior and pitched two years in the Yankees' minor league system before New York made him a scout at age 23. He worked in baseball for the next 36 years, including the past 16 for the Giants. Last month he was assigned to provide World Series advance work by covering the ALCS between Kansas City and Baltimore. On Oct. 11, the day of ALCS Game 2, Saleski died unexpectedly in Baltimore. He was 59 years old.

The next night Sabean couldn't bear to go to the ballpark to watch the Giants play Game 2 of the NLCS against the Cardinals. Sabean, Balboni, Elder and a few others booked a private room at a St. Louis restaurant, away from a television.

Four nights later, when Travis Ishikawa made like Bobby Thomson and sent the Giants to the World Series with a walk-off home run, Sabean, sitting in his box at AT&T Park, dropped his head into his hands and sobbed.

A FEW HOURS before the final game of the World Series, Bochy huddled with Righetti and other staff members to map out a worst-case scenario. What if he had to use a quick hook on Tim Hudson, at 39 the oldest Game 7 pitcher in Series history? Bochy had been here before. In Game 6 of the 2010 NLCS at Philadelphia, with a chance to win the pennant, Bochy pulled his starting pitcher, Jonathan Sanchez, with no outs in the third inning of a 2–2 game. San Francisco won the game 3–2.

"Sometimes it's an overused praise," Sabean said, "but [Bochy] does rely on everybody on the roster. And he's as good as there is when it comes to the best-laid plans of running a game. He had rehearsed Game 7."

Reliever Jeremy Affeldt would be the first reliever in to pitch out of a jam. He would be the bridge to Bumgarner, who would be used to start an inning. Bumgarner would be the bridge to set-up man Sergio Romo and closer Santiago Casilla. Bochy figured Bumgarner could give him two or three innings—except Bumgarner blew up the plan by being better than Bochy dreamed. The lefthander was not a bridge to more relievers; he was a bridge to long-dead World Series legends such as Christy Mathewson, Waite Hoyt and Carl Hubbell.

JED JACOBSOHN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BUMGARNER AND POSEY); ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BUMGARNER)

Bumgarner already had been the MVP of the NLCS, and Sabean ran into him after he stepped down from a podium to accept that award. The GM thought about the kid he drafted out of Hickory, N.C., in 2007, how he was a fierce competitor but how "his demeanor is like glass"—so even and smooth, especially now as a 25-year-old owning the postseason.

"Hey," Sabean said to Bumgarner that day, "what are you going to do when you grow up?"

The answer came quickly. Bumgarner won Game 1 against the Royals, 7–1, and he won Game 5, 5–0, with the most strikeouts (eight) ever in a World Series shutout with no walks. It was after that game that Kansas City outfielder Jarrod Dyson, searching for comfort if not clairvoyance, said, "We don't have to face Bumgarner no more."

Bumgarner kept coming out to the mound in Game 7. The fifth inning. Then the sixth. The seventh. The eighth. (None among Bochy, Righetti or Posey even bothered to ask him how he was feeling after the eighth.) And the ninth. Sabean made his way from a press-level box to the visitors' clubhouse at Kauffman Stadium. But when he saw workers hanging plastic sheets over the lockers in anticipation of the celebration, he ducked into a side room with other members of his cabinet to watch the end on television.

The first two outs came quickly. Then Alex Gordon lined a single to centerfield, where a misplay by Gregor Blanco allowed the ball to bounce to the wall, where the intersection of leftfielder Juan Perez and the bouncing baseball resembled a man pulling a potato out of the oven without an oven mitt. By the time Perez corralled it and threw it to shortstop Brandon Crawford, Gordon was pulling into third base under the astute stop sign of coach Mike Jirschele.

Sabean grew tense. Bochy, even with Casilla warming, didn't dare move. Truth be told, Bochy had decided Bumgarner was staying in to face not just the next batter—Salvador Perez, a righthanded hitter—but also the one after that, lefthanded Mike Moustakas, if needed. "He's a unique kid," Sabean said of his pitcher. "He's very grounded and strong as an ox. He's got an inner courage to do what he did."

At that moment Tidrow thought about the reports his scouts filed before the series on the Royals. Two defining characteristics stood out. The first was that the Kansas City hitters were crushing pitches on the outer half of the plate. Gordon, Eric Hosmer, Billy Butler, Perez . . . they all were diving into pitches with full-blown confidence. You had to pitch them inside. This worried the Giants because two of their starters, Jake Peavy and Hudson, no longer threw with the kind of velocity you need to pound hitters inside. (The two of them allowed 14 runs in 13⅔ innings in four starts.)

The second characteristic was that the Royals were eager to play the hero. They brimmed with such youthful confidence that they would expand the strike zone to get a hit rather than take their walks and leave it up to the next hitter.

The Royals were eager to play the hero. They would expand the strike zone to get a hit. Bumgarner was the perfect antidote.

BRAIN BEHIND THE BRAWN
Two of Sabean's better moves have been trading for Pence (left) in 2012 and drafting Bumgarner in '07.

Bumgarner was the perfect antidote to both traits. He loves to pound his fastball and cutter on a hitter's hands, and he has such precise control of his fastball that he can locate it just above the top of the strike zone, where the big dreams of eager hitters die.

Bumgarner threw six fastballs to Perez, every one to a target so high that Posey rose slightly from his crouch to reach them. Perez swung at all but two, the last one resulting in a foul pop-up that was caught by third baseman Pablo Sandoval. It was the 92nd high fastball Bumgarner threw in the Series. The Royals managed to get a hit on only one of them.

Three days after the World Series, and one day after another parade in San Francisco, Bochy finally had a quiet moment with Bumgarner. It happened in Bochy's office at AT&T Park.

"What you did was a great and historic effort," Bochy told him. "I don't know if you even realize what you did. Hopefully, you'll have time one day to look back at all the greats of the game who never did what you just did."

Bumgarner, ever glasslike, never broke from character. Had he done so, he might have pointed out that Bochy, too, had entered a hallowed realm. Bochy joined only eight other managers to win more than 1,500 games and three World Series. The others are all in the Hall of Fame. Likewise, Sabean, given his groundwork for the Yankees' dynasty and his architectural work for the Giants' three-for-five run, may join Pat Gillick as the rare general manager from the free-agent era to be elected to the Hall.

Neither Bochy nor Sabean is done chasing championships. Both of them are signed through 2016. They signed contract extensions on the same day in '13, just as they did on the same day in '11, and just as they did on the same day in '09. This is how they do their best work, even if it's four in the morning: together. □

DEANNE FITZMAURICE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Off-season Story Lines to Watch

With the Hot Stove heating up, we preview some of the winter's most intriguing questions

Whole New Cubs?

BY ALBERT CHEN

PEOPLE OF Cubs Nation: Are you ready to believe? A fifth-place finish may not seem like real progress, but the 2014 season offered slivers of hope as Chicago's young core of position players came of age—mashers like Anthony Rizzo and Javier Baez made the team more captivating than an 89-loss club should be. The blueprint on the Northside has been to assemble a beastly offense from within while cobbling together a pitching staff on the fly, and now, entering Year 4 of the Theo Epstein era, Chicago is closer to becoming a juggernaut than you might think. They took another step forward with the hiring of Joe Maddon last week, but the roster is still starved for top-end pitching. Headlining the free-agent class is a trio of aces—Max Scherzer, Jon Lester and James Shields—and that's why the Cubs, a franchise flush with cash, are the team to watch this winter: If they can land one top pitcher (and two seems possible), then Chicago, after a five-year run of mostly hideous baseball, will contend for a division title in 2015. Believe it.

A-Rod Strikes Back

BY BEN REITER

AS DEREK JETER'S retirement tour reached its end, his longtime frenemy slowly began to inch his way back into the Yankees' vacated spotlight. Alex Rodriguez was mostly a specter in 2014 as he served his 162-game PED ban—"Alex has not *not* been talked to throughout the season," Yankees GM Brian Cashman reported in September, that loaded double negative saying it all—but he's shown up at a number of big football games recently. It was as if Rodriguez wanted to get the public used to the idea of him again, in preparation for a return to the Yankees' lineup that many said would never happen. Rodriguez's suspension ended at 12:01 Eastern the day after the World Series concluded, and all signs suggest that he will be on the field next April to start collecting the $61 million his club still owes him over the next three seasons. How will he be received? What kind of player will he be? Who knows? The only sure thing is that such uncertainty means watching A-Rod will be something that it hasn't been for years: fun.

Money Mania

BY JOE SHEEHAN

IT SHOULD be interesting to watch how the excess money in the game affects the free-agent and trade markets. National revenue is at an alltime high, while payrolls have dipped to just over 40% of revenues, down from close to 60% at the start of the century. Money from new local-TV contracts—the Dodgers' started this year, the Rangers' start next year—is itching to be spent. High-revenue teams like the Red Sox and the Cubs head into the off-season with room on their payrolls for 2015 and clear needs. All of this means we could see huge contracts not just for top domestic free agents like Max Scherzer and Jon Lester, but also for Cuban outfielder Yasmani Tomas and potential Japanese pitching import Kenta Maeda. GMs could trade for a player about to get expensive through arbitration or free agency and ink that player to a big extension. Second-tier free agents like David Robertson or Adam LaRoche could be in for paydays that seem crazy but simply reflect the amount of money burning a hole in teams' pockets.

Meet the New Boss

BY EMMA SPAN

LOVE HIM, hate him, or a little of both, Bud Selig has been in charge of baseball for a long, long time. (When he took over as acting commissioner in 1992, Mike Trout was one-year-old.) By now fans know Selig's habits and approach by heart. After all that's happened in the two-plus decades of the Selig era—the 1994 strike, the All-Star Game tie, the steroid scandals, the wild-card game(s), instant replay, record revenues—there's about to be a new sheriff. What can fans expect from Rob Manfred? MLB's chief operating officer has publicly been quiet about what, if anything, he plans to do differently as commissioner. He was a longtime Selig lieutenant and ally, so it would be foolish to expect radical change (especially in regards to MLB's approach to issues around performance-enhancing drugs, as Manfred spearheaded MLB's response to the Biogenesis scandal). Still, after 22 solid years of Bud, even the introduction of new tie patterns will feel like a step into a brave new world.

CHRIS O'MEARA/AP (MADDON); KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (RODRIGUEZ); MARK CUNNINGHAM/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (SCHERZER); STEVE RUARK/AP (MANFRED)

CARD TRICKS
Arizona's tendency to line up in a six-man line, with a man over each A gap, forces QBs like Carr (4) to change their protections, often adding a daunting chore for running backs such as Darren McFadden (20).

Photograph by
Robert Beck
Sports Illustrated

The MMQB

MIND THE GAP

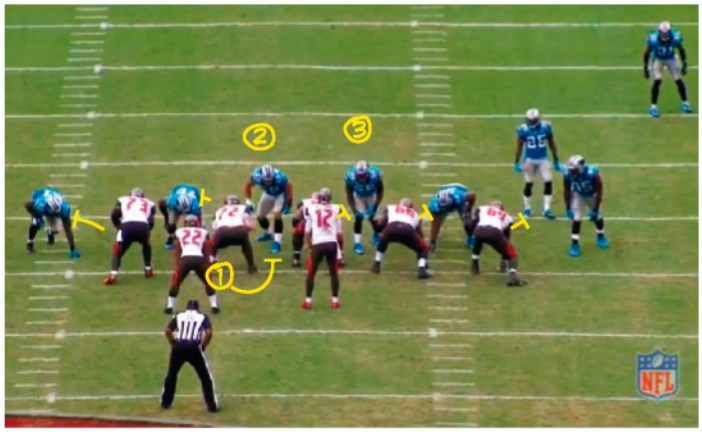
TODAY'S DEFENSES—HELLO, 7-1 CARDINALS!—APPLY PRESSURE BY THREATENING THE VITAL LANES BETWEEN THE CENTER AND THE GUARDS. AND ONCE A TEAM HAS SLOTTED A PAIR OF BLITZERS IN THOSE "A" GAPS? THAT'S WHEN THE FUN BEGINS **BY ANDY BENOIT**

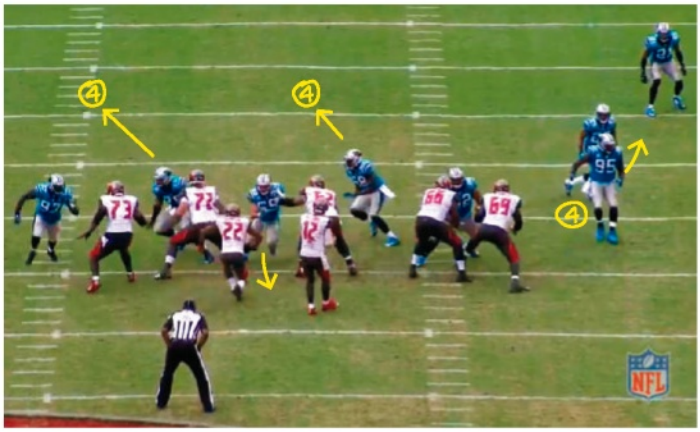
FACING third-and-seven from his own 18-yard line early in a Week 7 home game against the Cardinals, rookie Raiders quarterback Derek Carr barked out signals from the shotgun. He counted off six defenders on the line of scrimmage but felt secure knowing that he had two extra blockers—a running back and a tight end—helping his five linemen in pass protection. But that help wouldn't be enough. Seconds after the snap, the QB was sacked for a nine-yard loss, overwhelmed by the most daunting defensive scheme in football.

Carr's literal downfall had everything to do with two seams along the line of scrimmage, those on either side of the center, between the left and right guards: the A gaps. Slotted amid four linemen, inside the defensive tackles and flanking the center's shoulder pads, were linebacker Larry Foote and strong safety Deone Bucannon, both standing upright. By threatening the A gaps, they created "double-A-gap pressure," a wide-spanning concept that can be executed from any number of fronts and that over the last 15 years has been exploited by defensive coordinators to devastating effect.

All teams attack the A gaps; some, such as the Bengals, Cardinals, Jets and Vikings, do it regularly. Most do it intermittently, with the frequency growing every year. "You used to wait until you played a double-A-gap team, then you'd prepare for it," says five-time Pro Bowl center Nick Mangold, now in his ninth season with the Jets. "With the explosion of that scheme, now you work on it through the spring and at training camp."

And sometimes the mere threat of an A-gap blitz is enough: Many defenses will usually show two A-gap linebackers and blitz neither of them, instead dropping them into coverage and rushing just their four down linemen. But because the offense must assume the extra pressure is coming, it has to respond accordingly,





A DOUBLE-A-GAP PRESSURE CONCEPT AT ITS FINEST

In the first quarter of a Week 1 win over the Buccaneers, who are facing third-and-12, the Panthers put six men on the line, forcing Tampa to include running back Doug Martin **(1)**, a poor blocker, in pass protection. Martin will pick up linebacker Luke Kuechly **(2)** in the left A gap; center Evan Dietrich-Smith will take linebacker Thomas Davis **(3)** in the right A gap. All other blocking assignments remain standard. Upon the snap, Kuechly rushes—but

which can tilt the numbers game in the defense's favor. And winning the numbers game, really, is what football strategy is all about.

THE MOST obvious problem posed by a double-A-gap look is the threat it presents of immediate pressure in the quarterback's face, which is always the fastest way to wreck a play. Typically an unblocked pass rusher on the edge can be nullified by a quick-strike throw on a three-step drop-back or a smoke screen (a near-immediate pass to a wide receiver who's been given ample space at the line of scrimmage). But because of the A gaps' proximity to the ball, a defender coming untouched through that hole can still reach a QB. This partly explains the increase in shotgun formations in recent years.

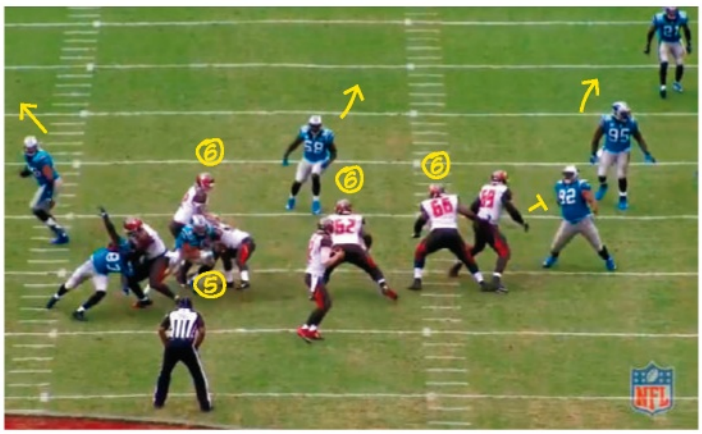
When both A-gap defenders rush, the center can handle only one man. One way to go about nullifying that advantage is through zone blocking—either "squeezing the protection," with a guard stepping in toward the center to create a tight wall, or "sliding the protection," with the whole line blocking in one direction while a running back takes on the exposed defensive end.

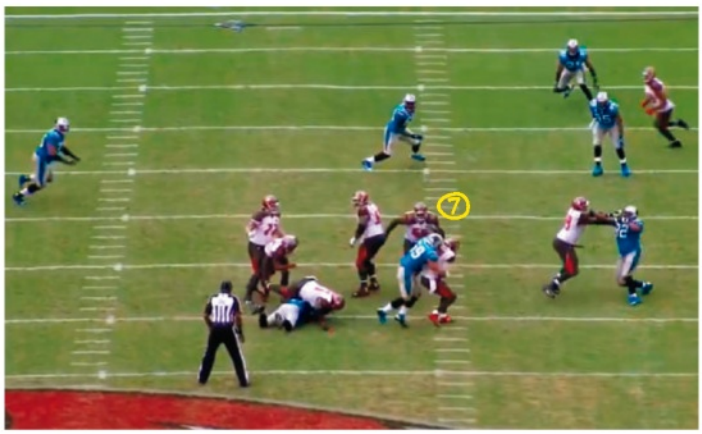
But squeezing the protection can leave tackles with even more space to worry about in battling lighter, quicker defensive ends, and it can muddy the blocking assignments as the B gaps (between the guards and tackles) grow. With protection slides, offenses very often end up with a running back or a tight end blocking a defensive end. To address that mismatch, the back and tight end could double-team the D-end—but then the offense has eliminated two of its five eligible receivers, leaving the three remaining pass catchers more susceptible to double coverages.

There's also the option of man blocking, enlisting a running back into one-on-one pass protection against the free linebacker. From the defense's perspective, though, says Foote, "this is the matchup you want." When a defensive coordinator dials up a blitz, he does not expect a clean rusher; more realistically, he hopes for a mismatch like the one created by double-A-gap pressure.

As a Steeler for 11 years early on in his career, Foote played for coordinator Dick LeBeau, who is not only the founding father of the zone blitz—in essence, dropping defensive linemen into coverage and asking cover men to rush the passer—but also one of the game's preeminent A-gap tinkerers. One of LeBeau's A-gap staples is what has come to be known as the Fire X blitz. In this ploy, Foote rushed from his usual stacked linebacker position, attacking the first blocker in the A gap in front

NFL REWIND (SEQUENCE)





three of the Panthers along the line, including Davis, drop into coverage **(4)**. Kuechly gets Martin one-on-one and easily beats him **(5)**. Just as damaging for Tampa, three linemen end up with no defender to block **(6)**; they contribute nothing to the play. The Panthers, meanwhile, only rush three, so they are able to drop defenders into an eight-man coverage. The total rewards: three wasted players for Tampa, an eight-on-four advantage for the Panthers in pass defense, plus the Kuechly-Martin mismatch. End result: sack **(7)**, seven-yard loss.

of him to create a path for the faster, more explosive Lawrence Timmons to loop around through the same hole. Timmons, also coming from his usual 'backer spot, benefited from an element of disguise as well as a full head of steam, bolstering his advantage over any running back kept in to block.

The Steelers have flourished by employing these types of tactics for years, and several other 3–4 teams, including the Eagles, Jets, Packers and Cardinals, use them today. The most daring of those defensive coordinators have expanded the concept to include a third A-gap pass rusher, generally a safety who blazes through one of the A gaps after two linebackers have attacked it. This particular twist is risky because it leaves multiple pass defenders (oftentimes *all* of them) in one-on-one coverage, but it's one of the few pressure designs that can guarantee an unblocked rusher to the quarterback.

"Todd Bowles, he's crazy aggressive with those blitzes," Foote says of his defensive coordinator in Arizona. "He'll bring that third rusher even when we're in the middle of the field. He don't care. In Pittsburgh we only did that near the goal line."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, one of the best double-A-gap teams in the NFL is the Panthers, who boast the best nickel linebacking tandem in reigning Defensive Player of the Year Luke Kuechly and stalwart veteran Thomas Davis. They play for a coach who knows the scheme as well as anyone: Ron Rivera was the Eagles' linebackers coach in 1999 when venerated defensive coordinator Jim Johnson introduced double-A-gap concepts to the mainstream.

"Jim was always [asking], What could affect the way the offense protects?" says Rivera. "He started spending time with [offensive line coach] Juan Castillo, asking Juan what affected his protections. . . . And once he figured out all the little protection nuances, *that's* how we were going to blitz."

At the heart of that scheme was Jeremiah Trotter, a thundering 260-pound middle linebacker who relished contact. "When the rush is coming from the outside, the quarterback feels like he has more time; he's more patient with his footwork, his release, his follow-through," Trotter says. "But when you get that instant pressure up

KIM KLEMENT/USA TODAY SPORTS (SACK)

Most blitz designs aim to force a running back into one-on-one pass blocking against a linebacker, as double-A-gap pressure does. **THIS, SAYS FOOTE, "IS THE MATCHUP YOU WANT."**

the middle—not only do they feel it, they *see* it."

Johnson understood all of the subtle ways in which his double-A-gap looks confounded offenses. He too was known to show blitz, forcing the running back to delay his route out of the backfield, only to have his linebackers drop back, creating one-on-one matchups elsewhere.

After Johnson started dabbling in this science, coordinators further evolved double-A-gap pressure into four-man rush concepts, very similar to zone blitzes, with one of those A-gap linebackers or safeties rushing while a defensive lineman drops back into coverage *(page 38)*.

First-year Vikings coach Mike Zimmer, who spent 14 years as defensive coordinator of the Bengals, Falcons and Cowboys, has long been on the cutting edge of double-A-gap tactics. "We have the ability to [blitz] numerous guys and drop numerous guys out of that look," he says. "That puts a lot of stress on the quarterback, on the backs, on the line and even on the receivers, because they don't really know what [coverage] they're going to get out of it."

Zimmer often buttresses his double-A-gap looks with an edge-blitzing safety, Harrison Smith, who's second among defensive backs with eight QB pressures (sacks, hits and hurries). Cincinnati has continued to find success with similar tactics under new coordinator Paul Guenther, formerly Zimmer's linebackers coach. (No. 1 on that pressures list? Bengals safety Reggie Nelson.) And even some of the more vanilla zone-based defenses, like the Cowboys', have manufactured success with double-A-gap zone blitz concepts. Those are potent because they drop defenders into the quick passing lanes that quarterbacks look to under pressure.

"Todd Bowles, he's crazy aggressive," says Foote. "He'll bring that third rusher even when we're in the middle of the field. **HE DON'T CARE.**"

For all of its benefits, double-A-gap pressure is not without its flaws. (If it were, every defense would employ it every play.) It can put added stress on defensive players, specifically linebackers. When 'backers do drop back from this look at the snap, says Zimmer, "they have to be able to do numerous things in coverage: sprint to a spot, understand and see the combination routes, know if we're playing man or zone. . . ."

Even when a team has the proper personnel, double-A-gap pressure can create defensive weaknesses. "You definitely like when a team plays man coverage behind that because you know you're going to get one-on-one opportunities for your receivers," says Mangold. "It also opens up opportunities in the run game. When you commit your linebackers inside, you take away their ability to flow to the ball, so [the offense] gets creases. There are chinks in the armor. It's not a perfect defense. But it is challenging."

CARR WRECK
A foray by Foote (50) toward the opposite A gap, as Wisniewski whiffed, put him right in the quarterback's grill. Pressure perfection.

BACK IN Oakland, those challenges were apparent. The problem that Arizona caused for Carr started with that classic LeBeau double-A-gap concept: Fire X. At the snap Bucannon gave a stutter step to the center's left, Foote crossed the center's face to attack the opposite A gap, and Bucannon fired behind him. With seven men in protection, the Raiders had felt comfortable blocking man-to-man, but the stunt confused center Stefan Wisniewski for a fraction of a second, and he initially followed Bucannon. Finding himself off-balance when Foote approached at an angle, Wisniewski was easily tossed to the side, and Carr went down in a pile.

In the past year the Cardinals have lost their top two linebackers to suspension and free agency, their best defensive lineman to a torn ACL and their top pass rusher to a series of concussions. And yet Bowles has kept this defense flying. His secret? It lies in the A gaps. □

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (6)

POWER YOUR PASSION

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Men's Scouting

MEN'S SWEET 16 **1** KENTUCKY **2** ARIZONA **3** WISCONSIN **4** DUKE
10 GONZAGA **11** NORTH CAROLINA **12** TEXAS **13** OHIO STATE

BOLT FROM THE BLUE
Aaron Harrison (2) and top-ranked Kentucky may have to go through Wichita State's Fred VanVleet (right) and Ron Baker to reach a second straight NCAA final.

Photograph by
David E. Klutho
Sports Illustrated

Preseason Reports

5 KANSAS **6** FLORIDA **7** LOUISVILLE **8** VILLANOVA **9** VIRGINIA
14 SAN DIEGO STATE **15** IOWA STATE **16** WICHITA STATE

The projections go far deeper at **SI.com/CBBpreview**, which has rankings of every team (from 1 to 351), forecasts of each conference race and video of the top scorers, freshmen, transfers and breakout players

PRESEASON POLLS have traditionally been an average of perceptions—of returning talent and key additions, and of a coaching staff's ability to convert all of that into wins. This season SPORTS ILLUSTRATED has adopted a rigorously empirical approach to its 1–351 rankings. Economist Dan Hanner has spent four years developing a statistical model that works from the bottom up, projecting advanced statistics—including offensive rating, possession usage, and rebound steal and block rates—for every Division I player, then using the results to forecast overall team performance. Hanner's model simulates the 2014–15 season 10,000 times, accounting for fluctuations in individual performance and health, and ranks teams according to their median efficiency.

This is the first season Hanner, working with SI's Luke Winn, has attempted to forecast (and publish) raw points-, rebounds- and assists-per-game totals for every player in the top 11 conferences. These projections are based on past advanced-statistical performance in the context of more than a decade of player data; the predictive power of recruiting rankings, both on immediate freshman performance and longer-term development; the quality of teammates and coaches; specific coaches' playing-time distribution tendencies; the estimated pace at which a team will play; and intelligence gleaned from coaches on how their rotations will be structured, which helped Hanner and Winn better understand how many minutes and shots will be available to each player. Read on to see how the top 16 teams stack up.

1 KENTUCKY

COACH JOHN CALIPARI (6TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 29-11 SEC 12-6

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
123.5 (3rd)	94.2 (8th)	15-3 (1st)

Cauley-Stein brings veteran leadership.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

	PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
G Aaron Harrison* 6'6" Soph.	11.4	3.1	1.5	122.3	20.7%
F-C Karl-Anthony Towns 6'11" Fr.	10.3	6.1	0.7	115.2	22.8%
PG Andrew Harrison* 6'6" Soph.	9.5	3.2	2.9	113.9	22.0%
F Alex Poythress 6'8" Jr.	7.8	4.7	0.6	119.5	18.9%
F-C Willie Cauley-Stein 7'0" Jr.	7.5	5.7	0.8	122.6	16.4%
PG Tyler Ulis 5'9" Fr.	7.6	1.7	2.7	110.3	20.6%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 3

Consecutive seasons in which **Kentucky has had a player block at least 100 shots.** Anthony Davis led the nation with 186 in 2011-12, Nerlens Noel had 106 in '12-13, and Willie Cauley-Stein had 106 last season.

Divide and Conquer

Kentucky coach **John Calipari** was at a high altitude when he came up with a solution to his high-end problem: how to keep a roster filled with nine McDonald's All-Americans happy. The answer: a two-platoon system.

Calipari tested his idea during a summer exhibition tour in the Bahamas. Ten Wildcats played between 17.8 and 21.0 minutes per game, and Kentucky went 5–1 against high-caliber teams that included pros. Still, Calipari points out that "this isn't communism." If certain players separate themselves from the group, their playing time will increase accordingly. The mostly likely candidate to max out minutes is 6' 11" freshman **Karl-Anthony Towns**, who was the team's second-leading scorer (11.0 points per game) and rebounder (6.5) on the Bahamas trip.

This year's group will benefit from the leadership of juniors **Alex Poythress** and **Willie Cauley-Stein**, as well as twin sophomore guards **Aaron** and **Andrew Harrison**, who each reduced his body fat to 4% (from 16%) over the summer. "I know we're going to lose some early games, and there's going to be a lot of grief," Calipari says, but he'll stick with his platoons "as long as I can." One way or another, in the end Kentucky will again be flying high. *—Seth Davis*

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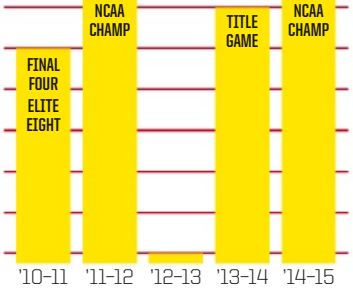

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

McConnell's court vision is exceptional.

2 ARIZONA

COACH SEAN MILLER (6TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 33-5 PAC-12 15-3

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
119.4 (7th)	91.2 (1st)	16-2 (1st)

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Stanley Johnson 6'7" Fr.	13.4	5.6	1.6	114.5	23.1%
PF	Brandon Ashley* 6'9" Jr.	13.0	6.7	1.1	118.6	21.8%
C	Kaleb Tarczewski* 7'0" Jr.	11.4	7.1	0.7	120.7	19.2%
SF	Rondae Hollis-Jefferson 6'7" Soph.	11.0	6.1	1.5	117.0	21.3%
PG	T.J. McConnell* 6'1" Sr.	9.2	3.4	5.1	115.3	17.9%
G	Gabe York 6'3" Jr.	7.7	2.4	1.6	119.8	17.3%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 40.2

Percentage of shots made by Wildcats' opponents inside the arc last season, **the best defensive two-point field goal mark for any major conference team** (and second best in the country, after UC Irvine's 39.2).

Numbers Game

Wildcats coach **Sean Miller** is a daily visitor to the national defensive efficiency rankings on kenpom.com. "It keeps me sane," he says. "Those are the numbers that I believe in." Miller knows—and this is backed up by a decade's worth of data—that you can't contend for a national title without being near the top of those rankings. He frequently lets his team know how its help-oriented, man-to-man D stacks up; last season Arizona ascended to No. 1 on kenpom in January, then earned a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. These Wildcats are aiming to set themselves apart by having another top-ranked D that's powered by senior **T.J. McConnell**, their pest of a point guard; sophomore **Rondae Hollis-Jefferson**, a 6' 7" lockdown wing; and the length of juniors **Brandon Ashley** (6' 9") and **Kaleb Tarczewski** (7 feet).

The return of Ashley—who tore a ligament in his right foot last February after establishing himself as a scoring threat in the post, in midrange isolation and on pick-and-pops—should also ensure that the offense doesn't stagnate. "No one," says the pass-first McConnell, "is happier to have Brandon back than me." The Wildcats were one possession away from the 2014 Final Four; with a few better bounces, a few more buckets and the same stout defense, the 2015 championship is within reach. *—Luke Winn*

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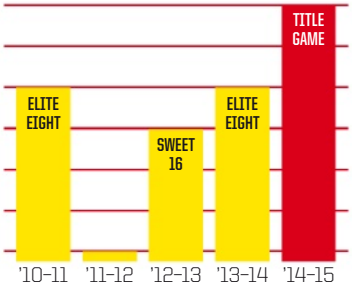

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

3 WISCONSIN

COACH BO RYAN (14TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 30-8 BIG TEN 12-6

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
124.1 (1st)	95.1 (19th)	15-3 (1st)

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

Gasser is Jeter-like when it matters most.

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Frank Kaminsky* 7' 0" Sr.	15.0	6.5	1.8	125.9	24.9%
SF	Sam Dekker* 6' 9" Jr.	13.8	6.0	1.7	125.3	22.2%
PF	Nigel Hayes 6' 8" Soph.	10.8	4.5	1.2	109.0	24.6%
PG	Traevon Jackson* 6' 3" Sr.	10.7	3.4	3.9	107.8	22.8%
SG	Josh Gasser* 6' 4" Sr.	8.8	3.9	2.0	130.8	13.6%
G	Bronson Koenig 6' 4" Soph.	6.1	2.3	2.0	119.1	15.2%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 2

Wisconsin's **national rank in turnover percentage** last season; the Badgers gave up the ball on just 12.7% of their possessions. (Georgia State surrendered it on 11.9%.) Wisconsin also ranked seventh in the country in offensive steal percentage (6.7).

The Glue Factor

In July forward **Frank Kaminsky** wrote a post on his personal blog headlined, If the Badgers Were a Baseball Team . . . (With Player Comparisons). Although he anointed himself the pitcher—with a comparison to fireballer Randy Johnson—Kaminsky reserved the most lavish praise for his shortstop, calling fourth-year starter **Josh Gasser** Wisconsin's version of Derek Jeter. "Josh is our glue guy and our captain," Kaminsky says. "He doesn't do anything that's flashy or exceptional, he just does everything well."

The 6' 4" Gasser attempted just 5.1 shots per game last season and is not athletically imposing; he played in a bulky left-knee brace after sitting out 2012–13 with a torn left ACL. But as sophomore forward **Nigel Hayes** says, "Josh takes on the load of guarding the best player, and when we're on offense, he always makes the right play." Gasser was named to the Big Ten all-defensive team in '13–14 and was Wisconsin's most efficient scorer, making 43.1% of his threes while committing just 0.8 turnovers per game. While Kaminsky is the preseason Wooden Award favorite and wing **Sam Dekker** is a projected first-round NBA draft pick, Gasser is so valuable for his crucial stops and timely shots that his teammates gave him a simple, Jeterian nickname: Clutch Josh.

—Luke Winn

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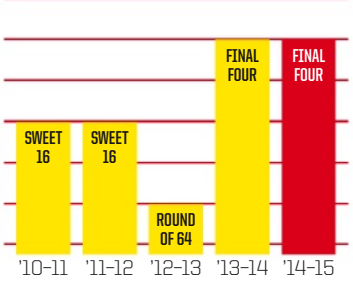

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

4

DUKE

COACH MIKE KRZYZEWSKI (35TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 26-9 ACC 13-5

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
123.9 (2nd)	95.6 (24th)	15-3 (1st)

Cook will have to share the playmaking.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
C	Jahlil Okafor 6' 11" Fr.	16.1	9.1	1.1	120.6	24.1%
PG	Quinn Cook* 6' 2" Sr.	12.5	2.3	4.5	124.5	20.5%
PG	Tyus Jones 6' 1" Fr.	12.3	3.6	4.9	116.8	22.2%
SF	Justise Winslow 6' 6" Fr.	10.1	4.3	1.3	111.7	20.0%
PF	Amile Jefferson* 6' 9" Jr.	7.3	6.5	1.0	132.8	16.0%
SG	Rasheed Sulaimon 6' 5" Jr.	10.9	2.8	2.2	124.9	20.2%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 5

Coaches in Division I **who have played at Duke for Mike Krzyzewski** now that Steve Wojciechowski has taken over at Marquette. He joins Tommy Amaker (Harvard), Johnny Dawkins (Stanford), Chris Collins (Northwestern) and Bobby Hurley (Buffalo).

PORTER BINKS

Points of Attack

With two of the nation's top freshmen due to arrive in Durham and a devastating NCAA tournament loss to Mercer lingering in the rearview mirror, coach **Mike Krzyzewski** let his returning players know he was wiping the slate clean. Past mistakes would be forgotten, but so would any goodwill the players had built up. "When you come off a loss in the first round, you get bad credit," senior point guard **Quinn Cook** says. "Your credit isn't where it needs to be."

Cook, who has 60 career starts, averaged 11.6 points last year while orchestrating the attack. Now he will have to share the baton with freshman **Tyus Jones**, who has been penciled in as the 2014–15 starter since he committed to Duke nearly a year ago. Cook has been playmaking from the wing in practices while Jones runs the offense; on defense, Cook picks up the opposing point. "The last couple of national champions had two point guards starting," Cook says. "It can be done."

They'll both be setting up another freshman, **Jahlil Okafor**, a crafty center whose old-school post moves have been compared with Tim Duncan's. The 6' 11", 265-pound Okafor gives the Blue Devils a post presence they haven't had since Elton Brand in 1998–99. Looks as if it will be a season to remember in Durham.

—Brian Hamilton

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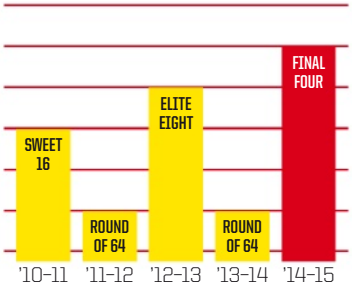

5 KANSAS

COACH BILL SELF (12TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 25-10 BIG 12 14-4

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
121.4 (4th)	93.7 (6th)	15-3 (1st)

A more assertive Ellis will be key.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Perry Ellis* 6'8" Jr.	16.1	7.7	1.3	126.9	22.6%
PF	Cliff Alexander 6'8" Fr.	11.7	6.8	0.8	117.4	22.8%
SG	Wayne Selden Jr.* 6'5" Soph.	11.2	3.6	2.1	115.3	19.5%
SF	Kelly Oubre Jr. 6'7" Fr.	10.6	4.4	1.2	117.4	22.8%
PG	Frank Mason III 5'11" Soph.	7.2	1.7	2.4	113.2	20.0%
PG	Devonte Graham 6'2" Fr.	6.3	2.3	2.2	104.6	18.3%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 14

Big 12 regular-season titles out of the last 18 for Kansas, **which has won 10 straight**—the longest active streak in Division I and tied for third (behind UCLA's 13 and Gonzaga's 11) on the alltime list. The Jayhawks have more conference titles (57) than any D-I team.

Five-Star Studded

The Jayhawks deal in *whens*, not *ifs*. *When* they sort out their rotation. *When* they lock down their defense. Coming off a 10th consecutive Big 12 regular-season title, Kansas again sits at the top of the conference, and it seems as if nothing has changed—except so much has. After losing three starters (including two top five NBA draft picks), the Jayhawks reloaded with three five-star recruits (bruising power forward **Cliff Alexander**, slashing swingman **Kelly Oubre Jr.** and Ukrainian sharpshooter **Sviatoslav Mykhailiuk**). Freshman **Devonte Graham**, a mere four-star prospect, will give Kansas its first true point guard in four seasons.

While coach **Bill Self** says, "Our guys aren't that far apart, from a talent standpoint," he takes pains to make one distinction clear: His best player won't be one of the newcomers. It will be junior forward **Perry Ellis**, the team's second-leading scorer (13.5 points per game) last year. Self hopes Ellis will add three to five points to his average while becoming a more vocal leader. "I am a real quiet guy," says Ellis, "but when something needs to be said, I'm going to try to say [it]." He's already counseled the younger Jayhawks about team chemistry. "When they figure it out," Self says, "they're going to get pretty good." —*Joan Niesen*

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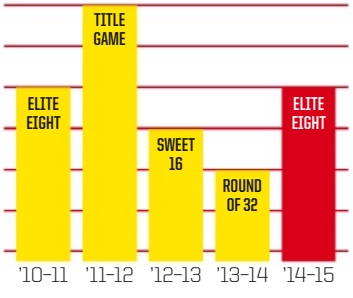

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

6 FLORIDA

COACH BILLY DONOVAN (19TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 36-3 SEC 18-0

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
119.5 (3rd)	94.3 (11th)	14-4 (2nd)

Can the talented Walker deliver wins?

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

	STARTERS	PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Michael Frazier II* 6'4" Jr.	13.2	4.1	1.4	130.5	17.1%
PF	Chris Walker 6'10" Soph.	10.8	5.9	0.8	113.6	20.5%
SF	Dorian Finney-Smith 6'8" Jr.	10.1	6.8	2.0	110.1	23.2%
PG	Kasey Hill 6'1" Soph.	9.1	2.8	4.1	111.5	19.6%
SF	Devin Robinson 6'8" Fr.	8.6	4.2	1.2	112.3	20.1%
SG	Eli Carter 6'2" Jr.	8.3	2.0	1.5	112.8	23.1%

*Returning starter Team Leader

TELLING NUMBER 63.3

Effective field goal percentage (a stat that gives extra credit for three-pointers) for Michael Frazier in 2013-14, which ranked him 18th nationally. **He sank 118 treys, a school record, and connected on an SEC-leading 44.5%**, 10th best in the county.

STEVE HELBER/AP

Growing Pains

On the day **Chris Walker** became academically eligible to play last December, 15 NBA scouts came to watch him practice. A 6' 10" sophomore with a 7' 3" wingspan and 39-inch vertical, Walker is the kind of athletic big man the pros covet. But his tantalizing potential and short résumé—a career total of 34 points—sum up the issues with these Gators: Can a team filled with mock-draft potential deliver real-life results?

Walker, who will be suspended for the first two games for violating team rules, has limited low-post moves and no perimeter game, but he is an excellent shot blocker who will help coach **Billy Donovan** increase the tempo of his already smothering full-court pressure. Three-point specialist **Michael Frazier II** is one of the country's top shooting guards, though he must learn to create his own shot now that defenses will be game-planning for him. And how effective will sophomore point guard **Kasey Hill** be in crunch time without the support of Scottie Wilbekin, the 2013 SEC player of the year? "We may have to lose games for us to get better," says Donovan.

The Gators' coach proved last season that he could take a roster full of question marks all the way to the Final Four. With a starting lineup that includes four Top 25 recruits, he'll likely find the right answers again. *—Pete Thamel*

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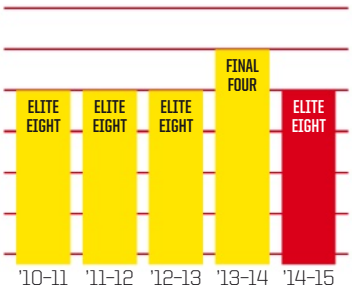

7 LOUISVILLE

COACH RICK PITINO (14TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 31-6 AMERICAN ATHLETIC 15-3

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
117.4 (11th)	92.8 (4th)	14-4 (2nd†)

†in the ACC for 2014-15

Harrell's 97 dunks set a school record.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Montrezl Harrell* 6'8" Jr.	15.0	7.8	1.1	122.3	23.1%
PG	Chris Jones* 5'10" Sr.	12.5	2.5	3.3	110.6	22.6%
G	Terry Rozier 6'1" Soph.	12.5	4.3	3.1	117.7	20.7%
SF	Wayne Blackshear* 6'5" Sr.	9.7	3.8	1.0	124.6	16.6%
C	Mangok Mathiang 6'10" Soph.	5.1	4.4	0.6	115.0	16.8%
SF	Shaqquan Aaron 6'7" Fr.	7.0	3.6	0.9	106.9	20.7%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER +6.7

Average turnover margin for the Cardinals in 2013-14, which led the nation. Louisville also had the largest scoring margin (+19.9), and **the Cardinals are the only team to rank among the top 10 in steals in each of the last four seasons.**

Return Investment

On April 14, **Montrezl Harrell** texted coach **Rick Pitino**, saying that he wanted to enter the NBA draft. Two hours later Harrell changed his mind. In those 120 minutes Louisville went from being a bubble team back to being a Final Four contender. The Cardinals' forward, who was named first team All-AAC last season, after averaging 14.0 points and 8.4 rebounds, is that good—and he's worked to get better. In the off-season he put himself through lonely, late-night workouts in Louisville's practice facility, perfecting his ballhandling and midrange jumper. Though he made just two three-pointers last season, Harrell was 7 for 18 from behind the arc in the Cardinals' three preseason intrasquad scrimmages. "I'm still going to stick to what I do best, which is finishing around the rim," he says. "But I'm going to be able to step away and take people off the bounce too. That's going to help our team out a lot more." This team needs his help. Senior swingman **Wayne Blackshear** and senior point guard **Chris Jones** are experienced, but seven freshmen will vie for minutes off the bench. It will be difficult for Pitino to unleash his trademark full-court pressure, so Louisville needs to be effective in its half-court offense. That's why Harrell's return, as well as his evolution, matters so much. —S.D.

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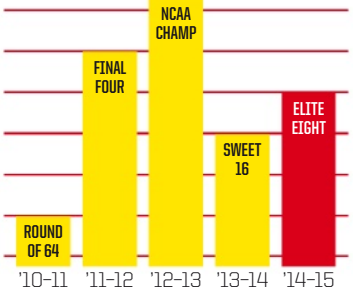

DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Ochefu can operate inside and outside.

8

VILLANOVA

COACH JAY WRIGHT (14TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 29-5 BIG EAST 16-2

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
117.7 (10th)	94.5 (12th)	14-4 (1st)

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	JayVaughn Pinkston* 6'7" Sr.	15.2	6.3	1.7	119.8	25.6%
SG	Darrun Hilliard* 6'6" Sr.	14.5	4.1	2.5	116.0	22.7%
PG	Ryan Arcidiacono* 6'3" JR.	10.9	2.7	3.4	119.2	18.6%
SF	Josh Hart 6'5" Soph.	10.6	5.3	1.2	126.0	18.1%
C	Daniel Ochefu* 6'11" Jr.	7.4	7.0	1.4	109.8	18.1%
PF	Kris Jenkins 6'6" Soph.	7.9	3.6	1.0	119.1	18.3%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 44.8

Percentage of Villanova's field goal attempts that were **three-pointers last season, the seventh most nationally.** Shots from beyond the arc accounted for 34.4% of the Wildcats' offense, according to kenpom.com.

CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

Big Options

There are plenty of ways to use an agile, savvy big man like junior **Daniel Ochefu**. He can be the defensive anchor in the Big East's smallest lineup, blocking 7.7% of opponents' two-point attempts (fourth best in the conference). And because of his quickness, he can also defend the perimeter, enabling the Wildcats to trap and switch. On offense, too, he can venture away from the basket for pick-and-pops and dribble-handoffs. "Just because he's 6' 11"," says coach **Jay Wright**, "we don't want to lock him on the block."

Still, while Ochefu is down there, he might as well be effective. Too often last season defenders were free to swarm 6' 7" **JayVaughn Pinkston** in the post and play Ochefu loosely, knowing he'd rather pass. So Ochefu spent his summer backing down assistant **Baker Dunleavy**, working to increase his offensive repertoire (and his average of 5.7 points). "Now I can look to score first and use my passing as a second option," says Ochefu.

That will create more opportunities for Pinkston, as well as space the floor for the Wildcats' trey-happy offense. Which is not to say that Ochefu can't still provide hands-on help from the high post. "We used [that] a lot last year," says Wright, "and we're going to use it more this year." Big East bigs, stay on your toes. *—Dan Greene*

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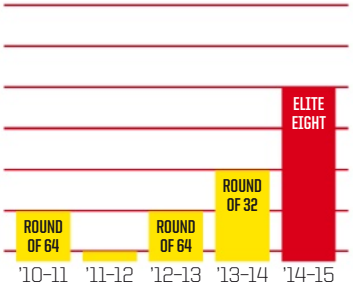
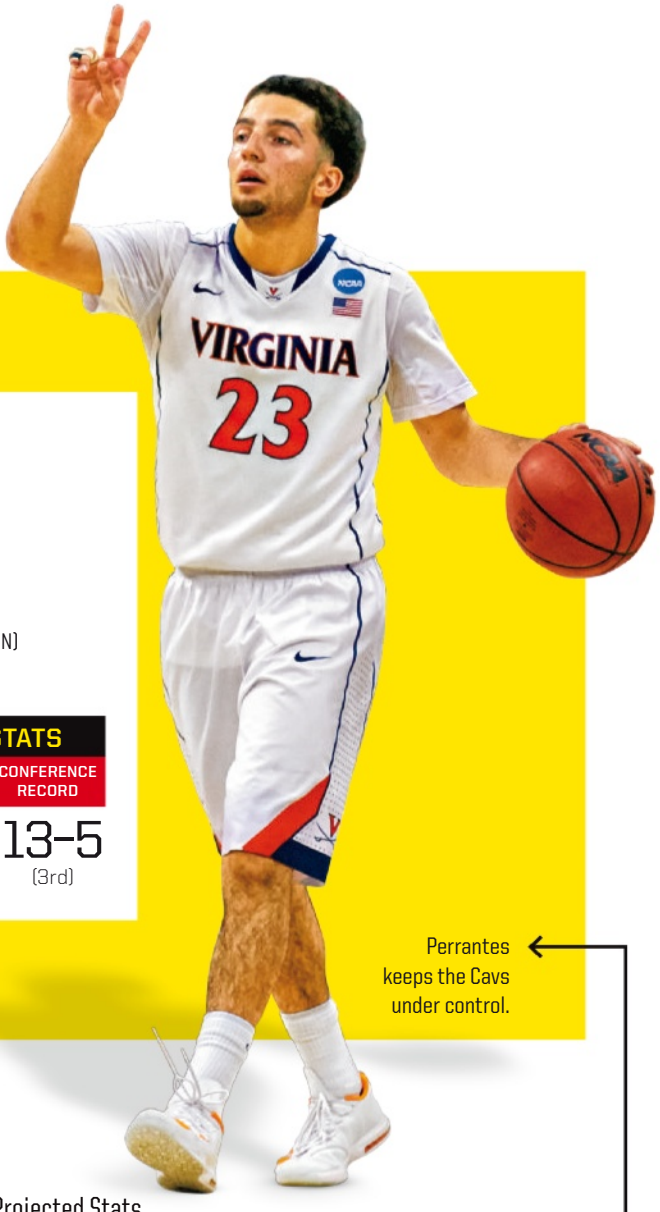


9 VIRGINIA

COACH TONY BENNETT (6TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 30-7 ACC 16-2

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
114.4 (24th)	91.8 (2nd)	13–5 (3rd)



Perrantes keeps the Cavs under control.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Malcolm Brogdon* 6'5" Jr.	13.5	5.5	2.9	113.5	22.5%
SF	Justin Anderson 6'6" Jr.	11.3	4.5	2.3	109.5	22.5%
PF	Anthony Gill 6'8" Jr.	10.2	4.9	0.7	112.5	22.4%
C	Mike Tobey* 7'0" Jr.	9.5	5.5	0.6	111.3	22.4%
PG	London Perrantes* 6'2" Soph.	6.7	2.6	3.8	117.0	14.5%
PF	Darion Atkins 6'8" Sr.	6.6	4.8	0.6	102.3	19.8%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 5

Consecutive seasons—since Tony Bennett arrived in Charlottesville—in which **Virginia's win total has increased over the previous year.** The Cavaliers have improved from 15 victories in his first season (2009-10) to 30 last year.

Steady as He Goes

Last year, when point guard **London Perrantes** arrived as a freshman, his teammates and coaches worried that the laid-back Californian wasn't ready for the pace of D-I basketball. "They were on my case about going too slow," he says. "But now I don't get any of that."

It's easy to see why. The even-keeled, pass-first Perrantes proved a perfect fit for the Cavaliers, a methodical team that ground its way to the program's first ACC title since 1976. Despite averaging 29.9 minutes as the primary ballhandler, Perrantes had 16 games with no turnovers (including 10 in conference play) while creating open looks for leading scorers **Malcolm Brogdon** and Joe Harris. When you average the third-fewest possessions in the country, taking care of the ball is essential. "The moment was never too big for him," says coach **Tony Bennett**.

With Harris gone, Perrantes will try to find ways to score off the dribble. Replacing the team's second-leading scorer, however, will be a collective effort, with more expected from energetic former sixth man **Justin Anderson** and forward **Anthony Gill**, who scored in double digits six times last March. "We'll find a way," Perrantes says.

He's in no rush. —D.G.

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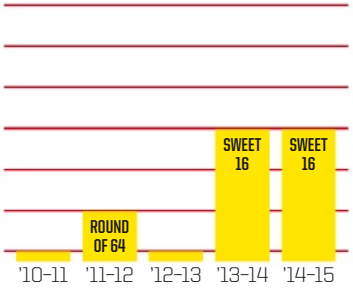


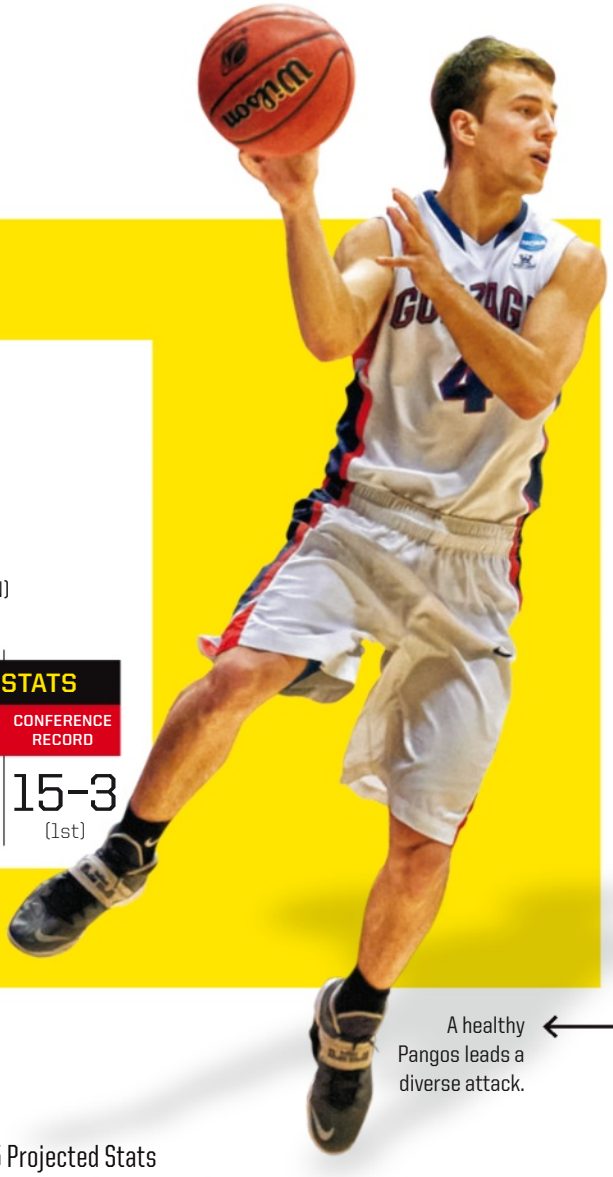
SIMON BRUTY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

10 GONZAGA

COACH MARK FEW (16TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 29-7 WCC 15-3

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
117.1 (12th)	95.5 (23rd)	15-3 (1st)



A healthy Pangos leads a diverse attack.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Kevin Pangos* 6'2" Sr.	14.2	2.8	3.5	127.3	20.0%
PF	Kyle Wiltjer 6'10" Jr.	12.3	5.2	1.0	121.9	21.7%
C	Przemek Karnowski* 7'1" Jr.	11.3	7.0	0.8	111.4	22.5%
SF	Byron Wesley 6'4" Sr.	11.0	4.2	1.7	112.9	21.6%
SG	Gary Bell Jr.* 6'2" Sr.	10.4	2.2	1.8	127.6	17.6%
PF	Domantas Sabonis 6'10" Fr.	8.6	8.1	0.7	108.3	18.1%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 80.1

Winning percentage for Mark Few (403-100 in 15 seasons), which ranks first among active coaches. (UNC coach Roy Williams is a close second, with 79.2.) **Few ranks fifth on the alltime list, just behind former UCLA coach John Wooden (80.4).**

Balance Check

The real **Kevin Pangos** was last seen on Nov. 27, 2013, in Gonzaga's final game of the Maui Invitational. The point guard torched Arkansas for 34 points and committed just one turnover in 39 minutes against the Razorbacks' press. But soon after, he suffered a turf-toe injury in his right foot, and a series of left-ankle sprains followed. "Everything got thrown off," Pangos says, including his balance, speed-changing ability and cutting. "He couldn't even walk after games," says coach **Mark Few**.

Pangos then endured a gym rat's worst nightmare: having to stay off the court for three months, not to mention regularly submerging his feet in icy water. A fully recovered Pangos and fellow senior **Gary Bell Jr.** could be the nation's most efficient scoring backcourt, and the Zags, who were led by frontcourt stars in each of the past three seasons, should have a diverse, balanced offense. "This year's team has as much depth as we've ever had," says Few, who added key transfers in power forward **Kyle Wiltjer** (from Kentucky) and swingman **Byron Wesley** (USC), and has an emerging low-post force in junior **Przemek Karnowski**. Few's new crew is healthier, more talented and harder to defend—a promising formula for a breakthrough into the second weekend of the NCAAs. —L.W.

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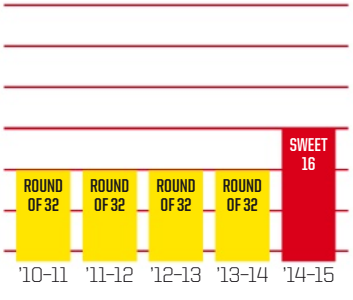

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

11

NORTH CAROLINA

COACH: ROY WILLIAMS (12TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD: 24-10 ACC 13-5

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
116.5 (14th)	95.4 (22nd)	12–6 (4th)

Paige—finally—has some help in the post.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Marcus Paige* 6' 1" Jr.	17.2	3.8	4.6	119.8	21.8%
SF	Justin Jackson 6' 8" Fr.	13.1	5.7	1.5	117.2	21.6%
PF	Brice Johnson 6' 9" Jr.	13.0	7.7	1.1	119.8	22.4%
C	Kennedy Meeks* 6' 9" Soph.	11.3	8.2	1.1	115.0	21.5%
SF	J.P. Tokoto* 6' 6" Jr.	7.8	4.3	2.3	109.6	18.7%
SF	Theo Pinson 6' 6" Fr.	8.5	3.8	1.1	112.1	19.4%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 58.9

Percentage of the team's 146 three-pointers that were made by Marcus Paige, **the second highest in school history.** Only two other Heels have hit more than half the team's treys: Hubert Davis (59.0% in 1991–92) and Shammond Williams (50.5% in '96–97).

Command Posts

Coach **Roy Williams** is already sick of repeating the key to the Tar Heels' success this season: At least one of their big men must become the kind of go-to inside presence that helped lift the program to NCAA titles in 2005 (with center Sean May) and in '09 (forward Tyler Hansbrough). Fortunately for Williams, North Carolina has two promising options.

Junior 6' 9" power forward **Brice Johnson** has bulked up to 228 pounds—41 more than when he arrived as a true freshman—and offers more of a true post-up option than James Michael McAdoo ever did. And 6' 9" sophomore center **Kennedy Meeks**, who averaged 7.6 points and 6.1 rebounds in just 16.3 minutes last season, is more explosive and better conditioned after *shedding* nearly 50 pounds since he arrived in Chapel Hill. He now has the stamina to keep up with the high-tempo UNC offense. "He's running better," says junior point guard **Marcus Paige**, the ACC player of the year favorite. "[And that means] we can get him more post touches, and he can give us more effort on the boards. He just looks like a new person."

Solid contributions from Johnson and Meeks will take the pressure off Paige, who averaged a team-high 17.5 points but also forced too many shots. It's good to have options, as Williams well knows. —*Sarah Kwak*

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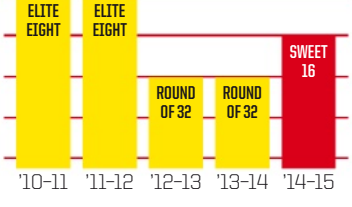

GERRY BROOME/AP

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12 TEXAS

COACH RICK BARNES (17TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 24-11 BIG 12 11-7

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
115.9 (16th)	95.0 (18th)	12–6 (2nd)

Turner is eager to be the anchor down low.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PG	Isaiah Taylor* 6'1" Soph.	13.1	3.4	3.9	106.1	24.1%
SF	Jonathan Holmes* 6'8" Sr.	12.4	7.3	1.0	120.4	21.8%
PF	Myles Turner 6'11" Fr.	12.3	8.2	0.9	120.8	20.5%
C	Cameron Ridley* 6'9" Jr.	11.0	7.5	0.5	114.8	21.8%
SG	Demarcus Holland* 6'2" Jr.	5.8	3.1	1.8	102.2	15.5%
PG	Javan Felix* 5'11" Jr.	10.1	1.4	2.8	110.7	22.6%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 39.6

Offensive rebounding percentage for the Longhorns last season, which **ranked sixth nationally**. Their better work on the boards (Texas ranked 80th in the same category in 2012-13) was a major reason for their eight-win improvement.

A Different Tune

This time last year the only buzz about the Longhorns involved speculation about potential replacements for coach **Rick Barnes**. (Buzz Williams? Shaka Smart?) A flurry of transfers had left Texas with an underwhelming roster and little hope for a ticket to the Big Dance. But the Longhorns adopted a gritty, defense-first identity, advanced to the NCAA round of 32 and got Barnes a contract extension through 2019—as well as a commitment from consensus top 10 recruit **Myles Turner**.

On a team that has 94.0% of its scoring and nine of 10 rotation players back, Turner's presence ups expectations exponentially. At 6' 11" with a 7' 4" wingspan, he is on board with the defensive philosophy, vowing to become a frontline "anchor." Barnes raves about Turner's timing on blocked shots but worries that at just 240 pounds he'll get banged around down low. Fortunately he'll have 6' 9", 285-pound center **Cam Ridley** and 6' 8", 240-pound wing **Jonathan Holmes** to back him up. "We really have a chance to protect the rim," Barnes says.

The Longhorns lack a three-point threat, which means they'll have to rely on sophomore point guard **Isaiah Taylor**'s ability to penetrate and create. But if their offensive rhythm matches their defensive mojo, Austin will be buzzing for all the right reasons. —P.T.

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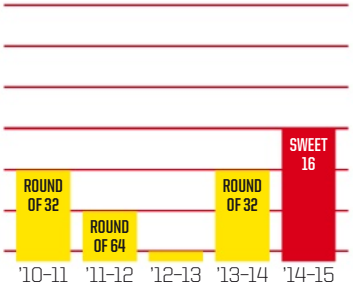
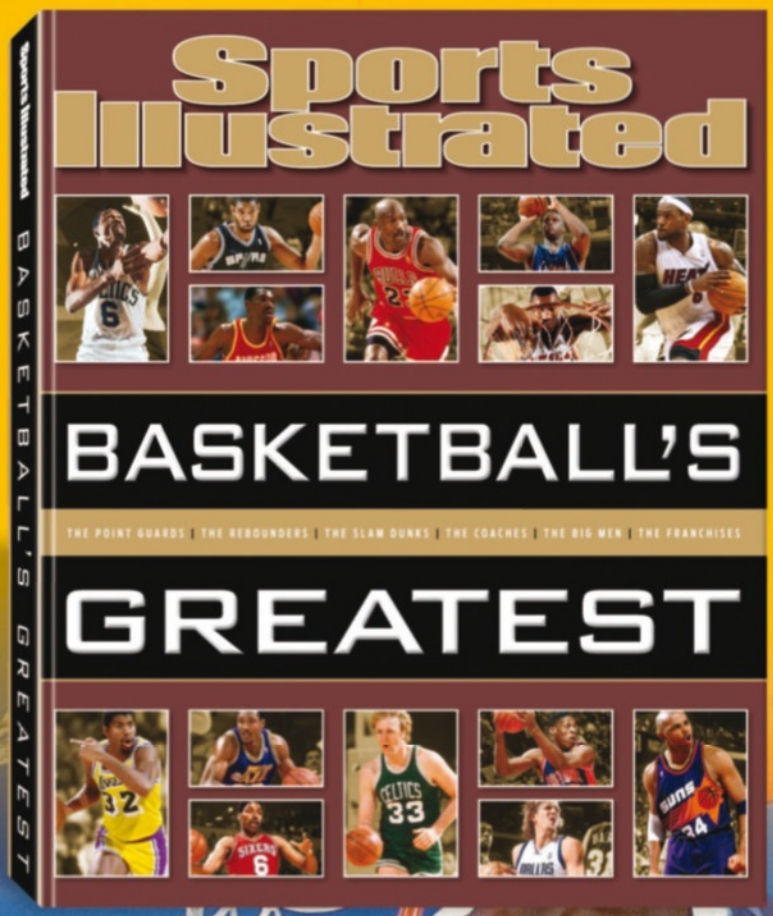


DARREN CARROLL FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

WHICH PLAYERS REIGN SUPREME?



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13 OHIO STATE

COACH THAD MATTA (11TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 25-10 BIG TEN 10-8

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
112.2 (48th)	92.5 (3rd)	12–6 (2nd)

Scott & Co. need to move the ball better.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	D'Angelo Russell 6' 5" Fr.	13.3	4.5	2.1	109.4	23.6%
PG	Shannon Scott* 6' 1" Sr.	10.0	3.7	5.1	110.8	18.9%
SF-PF	Marc Loving 6' 7" Soph.	9.8	4.3	0.6	110.6	21.9%
SF	Sam Thompson 6' 7" Sr.	9.4	3.0	1.2	116.0	16.9%
C	Amir Williams* 6' 11" Sr.	7.3	5.4	0.3	116.6	18.3%
PF	Anthony Lee 6' 9" Sr.	7.6	5.8	0.5	109.9	20.5%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 1

Gospel rap song recorded by 6' 9" Temple transfer **Anthony Lee, who also led the AAC in rebounding (8.6) last season**. Lee's song, "Ball," was used during the Owls' pregame warmups in 2010-11. He performs under the name Young Polo.

Identity Shift

The Buckeyes know they won't be the same team defensively after the graduation of pit bull point guard Aaron Craft. More important, they know they *can't* be the same offensively. The ball rarely rotated last season, and when it did, players often stood around waiting for someone else to shoot. The result was the nation's 128th most-efficient attack. "One guy would have the ball on one side of the floor for 10, 15, 20 seconds," forward **Sam Thompson** says. "It's hard to have a fluid offense like that."

In off-season workouts coaches emphasized movement, spacing and playmaking. In the "pin-down" drill, for example, a big man dropped from the free throw line to set a screen for a guard or a wing. The player who received the pass was instructed to immediately shoot, dribble or feed the ball into the post. "Everyone catches the ball, looks to the rim and makes something happen right away," guard **Shannon Scott** says.

Still, no returning player averaged more than 7.9 points last year. So expect the moving ball to find its way to 6' 5" McDonald's All-American **D'Angelo Russell**, a high-volume scorer who's also an excellent passer. "He has such a good feel for the game, wherever he is on the floor," Thompson says. The rest of the Buckeyes need to follow his lead in order to be both different *and* better. —B.H.

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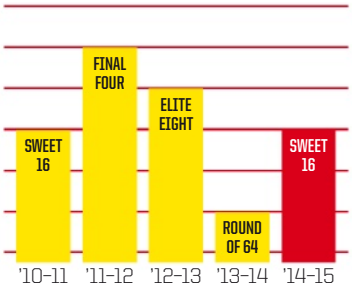

DAMIAN STROHMEYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

14 SAN DIEGO STATE

COACH STEVE FISHER (16TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 31-5 MOUNTAIN WEST 16-2

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
112.4 (42nd)	92.8 (5th)	15-3 (1st)

Shepard is ready for his star turn.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SF	Winston Shepard* 6'8" Jr.	12.0	4.9	2.2	105.2	28.3%
SF	Dwayne Polee II 6'7" Sr.	10.9	4.4	0.6	115.5	22.8%
G	Trey Kell 6'4" Fr.	7.9	3.7	1.6	106.0	19.2%
F	J.J. O'Brien* 6'7" Sr.	7.4	4.2	1.1	109.3	18.5%
F-C	Skylar Spencer* 6'10" Jr.	5.4	4.4	0.3	116.0	13.6%
SF	Matt Shrigley 6'6" Soph.	8.4	2.8	1.0	114.9	18.5%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 120

Consecutive games the Aztecs have won **while leading with five minutes to play**, a streak that spans four seasons. The last time they squandered an advantage late in the fourth quarter was on Jan. 9, 2010, at Wyoming.

Next Star Up

Stud players have come and gone in recent years, yet San Diego State keeps right on winning. The first to depart was Kawhi Leonard, then Jamaal Franklin and now Xavier Thames, a three-year starter at point guard and 2014 Mountain West player of the year. His exit makes way for junior **Winston Shepard**, a 6' 8" swingman whose performance is finally matching his potential. "He read everything that was written, and he let all that bother him," coach **Steve Fisher** says, "but he's beyond that now." Shepard's versatility should help replace Thames's offensive production, but the Aztecs' strength remains their D: Last season they ranked in the top 10 in scoring defense, field goal percentage defense and three-point percentage defense.

At a time when young stars rule the game, Fisher has the benefit of an old-school lineup, which features two juniors and two fifth-year seniors. Those veterans will be joined by San Diego State's best-ever freshman class, which includes three players who were top 100 recruits, as well as another former top 100 player in 6' 9" junior **Angelo Chol**, a transfer from Arizona. That's a fitting roster for a long-in-the-tooth coach. "I always say I hope to be playing on my birthday," says Fisher, who'll turn 70 on March 24. This team has all the pieces to grant him his wish. —S.D.

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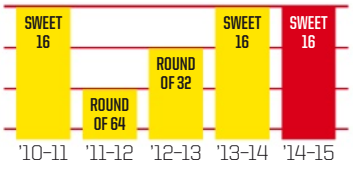

15 IOWA STATE

COACH FRED HOIBERG (5TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 28-8 BIG 12 11-7

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
116.7 (13th)	96.4 (30th)	12–6 (3rd)

A slimmer Niang will have a bigger impact.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
PF	Georges Niang* 6' 8" Jr.	18.4	5.6	3.3	114.5	27.5%
SG	Bryce Dejean-Jones 6' 6" Sr.	12.4	4.6	3.0	106.2	23.2%
SF	Dustin Hogue* 6' 6" Sr.	11.9	7.6	1.3	119.8	17.6%
F-C	Jameel McKay 6' 9" Jr.	11.8	7.2	0.8	107.5	20.8%
PG	Monté Morris* 6' 2" Soph.	8.7	3.1	4.5	124.2	14.8%
SG	Naz Long 6' 4" Jr.	7.9	2.3	1.3	117.3	15.4%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 4.79

Monté Morris's **assist-to-turnover ratio (134 to 28) during his freshman season.** He shattered the NCAA record of 3.96, set by Tyler Newbold of Utah State in 2008-09. Morris's mark of 6.91 in Big 12 games led the conference by 4.45.

Losing to Win

Every March loss hurts, but the sting after Iowa State's Sweet 16 exit against UConn last spring was especially sharp for 6' 8" forward **Georges Niang**. In the Cyclones' opening win a weekend earlier, Niang scored 24 points but broke the fifth metatarsal in his right foot, reducing him to a boot-footed spectator for the 81–76 loss to the Huskies.

During some injury-induced soul-searching, Niang realized he had taken basketball for granted. So he cleaned up his eating habits and amped up his workouts, dropping roughly 30 pounds (to 230). The result was an eye-catching set of before-and-after photos that went viral over the summer. Coach **Fred Hoiberg** also reports that Niang is "more efficient" in his movements—and he was already one of the nation's most creative post scorers. Niang's increased stamina will help him avoid fatigue-related fouls. "He was our closer last year," Hoiberg says. "He's a guy I have to have late in games."

More is gone from Ames than just Niang's extra weight: Big 12 Player of the Year Melvin Ejim and point guard DeAndre Kane graduated. Newcomers **Bryce Dejean-Jones** and **Jameel McKay** will fill those holes with the help of forward **Dustin Hogue** and surehanded playmaker **Monté Morris**. But's it's the slimmed-down senior who will carry the team. —D.G.

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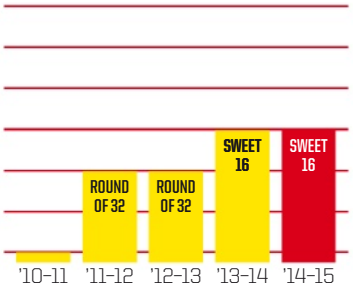

DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

16 WICHITA STATE

COACH GREGG MARSHALL (8TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 35-1 MISSOURI VALLEY 18-0

PROJECTED TEAM STATS

OFFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	DEFENSIVE EFFICIENCY	CONFERENCE RECORD
116.2 (15th)	96.4 (31st)	15-3 (1st)

VanVleet will direct old and new talent.

Lineup With 2014-15 Projected Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG	OFF. RATING	USAGE
SG	Ron Baker* 6'4" Jr.	14.3	4.1	3.1	124.2	22.7%
PG	Fred VanVleet* 6'0" Jr.	13.7	3.8	5.5	129.5	21.4%
SG	Tekele Cotton* 6'3" Sr.	11.5	4.3	2.6	120.5	19.8%
PF	Darius Carter 6'7" Sr.	9.4	4.9	0.7	116.4	22.6%
SG	Evan Wessel 6'4" Jr.	3.1	3.1	0.8	115.5	11.6%
F	Rashard Kelly 6'7" Fr.	6.1	4.1	0.5	103.3	19.4%

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 4

Consecutive seasons in which the Shockers have **ranked in the top 40 nationally in both offensive and defensive efficiency**, according to kenpom.com. Only Kansas (8) and Syracuse (5) have streaks of greater length.

Culture Shock

Having a quintet of key contributors return from a 35–1 team that earned the program's first No. 1 seed is a coach's dream. Choosing sides for an intrasquad scrimmage can get complicated, though, especially with the arrival of seven newcomers. Coach **Gregg Marshall** "put all of us veterans together one day, and it didn't go so well," says junior point guard **Fred VanVleet**. "They scored the first two points. Then five minutes later it was 20–2."

VanVleet is quick to point out that the youngsters did rally. As stellar as Wichita State's backcourt veterans are—VanVleet, fellow All-America candidate **Ron Baker** and perimeter pest **Tekele Cotton**—success in 2014–15 will depend on how quickly the inexperienced frontcourt jells. "I need these guys to assert themselves," says Marshall of freshmen **Rashard Kelly** and **Rauno Nurger**, juco transfer **Bush Wamukota** and rugged 6' 7", 261-pound redshirt freshman **Shaquille Morris**.

VanVleet has tried to accelerate the process, bringing Morris in for extra cardio sessions. When Morris skipped a set of stadium runs, the playmaker broadcast his displeasure on Twitter. "That was just to throw him under the bus a little bit because he needed it," VanVleet says. He knew that Morris, like the Shockers, would respond well. —D.G.

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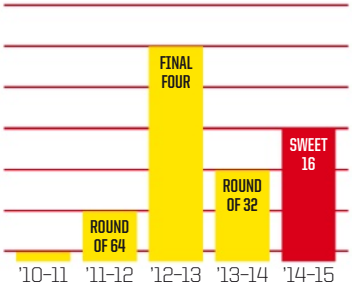

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

	ROUND OF 64	ROUND OF 32	SWEET 16	ELITE EIGHT	FINAL FOUR	TITLE GAME
1	KENTUCKY					
16	ROBERT MORRIS/ALA. ST.					
8	PITT					
9	UCLA					
4	WICHITA STATE					
13	GREEN BAY					
5	VCU					
12	GEORGIA STATE					
6	MICHIGAN STATE					
11	BYU					
3	TEXAS					
14	STEPHEN F. AUSTIN					
7	ARKANSAS					
10	ILLINOIS					
2	LOUISVILLE					
15	DENVER					

MIDWEST

Kentucky

A two-platoon system has kept the Wildcats fresh, and they coast through the first two rounds. **Alex Poythress** provides the key to winning the rematch of last season's round of 32 game against Wichita State, then helps Kentucky defeat Louisville, Duke and Arizona to win the school's ninth NCAA title.

November

	ROUND OF 64	ROUND OF 32	SWEET 16	ELITE EIGHT	FINAL FOUR	TITLE GAME
1	DUKE					
16	STONY BROOK					
8	GEORGETOWN					
9	MEMPHIS					
4	SAN DIEGO STATE					
13	UC IRVINE					
5	SMU					
12	OKLAHOMA STATE/CAL					
6	SYRACUSE					
11	COLORADO					
3	OHIO STATE					
14	TOLEDO					
7	STANFORD					
10	NEBRASKA					
2	KANSAS					
15	AMERICAN					

SOUTH

Duke

The freshman tandem of center **Jahlil Okafor** and point guard Tyus Jones power the Blue Devils past two of the nation's most efficient defenses in San Diego State (ranked fifth in SI's projections) and Kansas (sixth), but they don't have enough firepower to get past a third top 10 D (Kentucky, eighth).

JAMES CRISP/AP (POYTHRESS); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ASHLEY); AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (OKAFOR, KAMINSKY)

Madness

WEST

Arizona

With four starters projected to average double digits in points—and a floor general who knows how to keep them all happy—the balanced, efficient Wildcats get past one ACC team to make the Elite Eight. **Brandon Ashley**'s hot hand helps them knock off the Gators and the Badgers to reach their first title game since 2001.

TITLE GAME	FINAL FOUR	ELITE EIGHT	SWEET 16	ROUND OF 32	ROUND OF 64		
					ARIZONA	1
					N. ARIZ./COASTAL CAROLINA	16
					MARYLAND	8
					DAYTON	9
					NORTH CAROLINA	4
					MANHATTAN	13
					IOWA	5
					LOUISIANA TECH	12
					KANSAS STATE	6
					CINCINNATI	11
					GONZAGA	3
					NEW MEXICO STATE	14
					UTAH	7
					XAVIER	10
					FLORIDA	2
					WOFFORD	15

EAST

Wisconsin

The Badgers have been trained by coach Bo Ryan to value every possession, a mind-set that helps them cruise through the tournament's early rounds. **Frank Kaminsky** wins an epic big-man battle against Villanova's Daniel Ochefu, resulting in a second straight Final Four appearance.

TITLE GAME	FINAL FOUR	ELITE EIGHT	SWEET 16	ROUND OF 32	ROUND OF 64		
					WISCONSIN	1
					HOFSTRA	16
					HARVARD	8
					NOTRE DAME	9
					IOWA STATE	4
					MURRAY STATE	13
					UCONN	5
					UMASS/WYOMING	12
					MICHIGAN	6
					LSU	11
					VIRGINIA	3
					N.C. CENTRAL	14
					OKLAHOMA	7
					MIAMI	10
					VILLANOVA	2
					FLORIDA GULF COAST	15

Badger Ball

COLLEGE BASKETBALL '14 '15 PREVIEW

Don't be fooled by the old-school reputation. Wisconsin's surprisingly progressive—and championship caliber—offense will be the country's most efficient

BY LUKE WINN

FINALLY!
Ryan's 13th trip to the Big Dance was a lucky one, thanks to the efforts of (from left) Jackson, Kaminsky and Dekker.

Photograph by
John W. McDonough
Sports Illustrated

COLLEGE BASKETBALL '14 '15 PREVIEW

WISCONSIN

JACKSON

8.9

Percentage point improvement in his 3-PT shooting between his sophomore and junior seasons.

WISCONSIN WAS on the brink of the Final Four, and Butch Ryan was on the brink of something else. The team coached by his son, Bo, was threatening to upset No. 1 seed North Carolina in the Elite Eight in Syracuse on March 27, 2005. It was late in the second half, and Butch was pacing, alone and distressed, on a stretch of the Carrier Dome's football turf beyond the temporary basketball bleachers, with no view of the court. I got up from press row during a timeout, spotted him—a frail 80-year-old man with wispy, white hair—and went over to ask if he was O.K.

"I get too nervous, son," he said. "I can't watch."

I had met Butch the previous day—at practice—and he was all ham and no nerves. When I told him it was my first NCAA tournament working for SI, he told me stories of his annual Final Four vacations with Bo. Butch boasted of his rep as the jester from Chester, Pa., and even acted out his most famous bit—dancing on the stage of a Bourbon Street bar in 1993 and impressing one M.C. Hammer. Butch did not mention his long history of turning into a wreck when his kid was coaching. There was the triple-overtime thriller during Bo's first season ('74–75) at Sun Valley High in Aston, Pa., that Butch missed because he was outside throwing up in the bushes. During Bo's reign at Division III Wisconsin-Platteville from '84 through '99, when he won four national championships, Butch would often disappear to pace in the lobby of Williams Fieldhouse, head down, hands clasped behind his back.

Wisconsin lost to the Tar Heels 88–82, and later that week Butch and Bo made yet another trip to the Final Four as spectators. They went to 37 in all, from 1976 in Philadelphia through 2013 in Atlanta. (Butch missed just one, New Orleans in '12.) He'd sometimes say to Bo about the Badgers, who won three Big Ten titles in the first seven years of Bo's tenure, but had yet to reach a Final Four, "We gotta get those boys here one of these years. Whaddya think?"

On Aug. 30, 2013, nine months after his wife, Louise, passed away, Butch died from complications from a broken hip. In his life he had been an improbable mentor. His mother passed away when he was nine, and he had grown up mostly abandoned by an alcoholic father. He was expelled from Catholic school and lied about his age to join the Navy at 16. After fighting in World War II, Butch worked as a pipe fitter and eventually founded a youth-sports league in Aston. The quarterback on his first football team was Bo. "I never got to be a kid," Butch used to say, "so I want to work with them and give them what I didn't have." Butch coached youth-league teams for nearly four decades and was the inspiration for Bo's career path. "I'm sort of in him when he's coaching," Butch once said. "I feel every pain that he does."

KAMINSKY

6.5%

Projected '14–15 block rate for the senior, who led the Badgers in that category last year.

KOENIG

11

Points in the first half of the national semifinal game against Kentucky. UW's top reserve averaged 3.5 ppg for the season.

GASSER

83.9

Career free throw percentage for the senior, fourth best in Wisconsin history.

DEKKER

17.4

Defensive rebounding percentage for the fifth-year senior.

HAYES

7.3

Fouls drawn per 40 minutes last season, the highest rate on the team.

BILL FRAKES/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

In the season that followed Butch's death, the Badgers made it to the brink again. The closing minutes of their Elite Eight game against Arizona in Los Angeles was so nerve-racking—Traevon Jackson missed a shot at the end of regulation, and a five-*minute* video review gave Arizona an extra possession with 2.3 seconds left in overtime—that Bo's youngest son, Matt, couldn't bear to watch. Matt's brother, Will, believed that Butch was playing a joke on them from the afterlife, where he could now watch without fear of having a heart attack. The Wildcats' Nick Johnson failed to get a shot off before the buzzer, and on what would have been Butch's 90th birthday—March 29, 2014—Bo finally brought the Badgers to the Final Four.

At AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, the following week, Bo insisted that the stage wasn't new for him—he'd been to five Division III Final Fours—and he would prepare this team the same way he had Wisconsin-Platteville. Only the size of the venue and the level of scrutiny was different. But it was difficult not to notice that Ryan and the Badgers had entered a new phase. He had endured a great loss and then experienced a breakthrough. And although Wisconsin lost a Final Four heartbreaker to Kentucky, the Badgers bring so much back from a 30–8 team that they enter 2014–15 ranked No. 3, the highest preseason ranking in school history. *Whaddya think?* is no longer about cracking the Final Four. A national title is now realistic.

SIX SHOOTERS

Now that Hayes has extended his range, the Badgers' top rotation players are all three-point threats.

ON AN early-October evening in Madison during the first week of practice, 6' 9" junior wing Sam Dekker and 6' 8" sophomore power forward Nigel Hayes are waiting for orders of *pollo parmigiana* at Tutto Pasta Trattoria, a State Street institution. Hayes is explaining how he hated everything about the Badgers when the school began recruiting him in 2010. He grew up in Toledo an Ohio State fan and says, "I couldn't stand the way [Ryan's teams] played and how long they held the ball.

WISCONSIN

They just annoyed me."

Wisconsin's pace remains unhurried; last season it ranked 342nd (of 351 teams) nationally in average time of possession (20.5 seconds). But players feel that Ryan's system has become more adaptable—in 2013–14 the Badgers were the only team to win games with final scores in the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and 100s, and they did that while ranking fourth in adjusted offensive efficiency. The team's dynamic has also loosened. Bo has always been equal parts stickler and ham, and his Badgers are now ruthlessly efficient and endearingly goofy.

They drill their offense so extensively that Ryan never uses whiteboard diagrams during games, but they also spend stretching sessions pondering Dekker's riddle of the day. (One from October: *When do you go at red but stop at green?*) No Badger can attempt an inefficient long two-pointer without getting scolded, yet Dekker and Hayes get away with calling their 66-year-old coach "Pops" or "Dad" to his face.

On July 13 the majority of the Badgers went to senior forward Frank Kaminsky's hometown of Lisle, Ill., to serve as instructors at a camp for third- through 12th-graders. The younger campers wanted to scrimmage against the collegians, who were unsure how to proceed. They huddled up and asked, "Do we go easy on them?" Sophomore forward Vitto Brown said, "No prisoners. No matter how young, how small, you treat them as if they were your enemy." So the Badgers ran a diamond-and-one press, kept stealing the ball and passing to the 7-foot Kaminsky, who would wait under the basket for one or two kids to catch up to him, and then dunk over them so aggressively that they spilled to the floor. Says Hayes, "They'd get up laughing like it was the best thing to ever happen to them." Kaminsky says it was "my way of giving back to the community."

Scoring this season won't be as easy as posterizing preteens, but the Badgers' offense is what makes them title contenders. Kentucky is rife with foul-drawing, rim-protecting talent, and Arizona will have the nation's stingiest defense, but Wisconsin will have the country's most efficient offense, according to SI's statistical projections. Kaminsky will be the focal point; he's projected to use 24.9% of the Badgers' possessions with an offensive rating of 125.9, which would make him the nation's most efficient high-volume scorer. Frank the Tank loves Madison life so much that he was in no rush to jump to the NBA after starring in the 2014 NCAA tournament, and Hayes describes Kaminsky as "methodically potent." Among players that Synergy Sports Technology logged with at least 100 post-up possessions last season, Kaminsky was the second-most-efficient scorer on the blocks, and he also made 37.8% of his threes. He can be a source of awe—he had 28 points and 11 rebounds in the Badgers' Elite Eight win over Arizona—and unintentional comedy: One of his exasperated interactions with Ryan in a timeout huddle last season inspired the coach to insert a clip of *Napoleon Dynamite* into the team's film-session reel the following day. "Frank's a killer, though," Dekker says. "If he keeps doing what he's been doing, he can talk however he wants."

One of Kaminsky's exasperated interactions with Ryan in a timeout huddle **inspired the coach to insert a clip of *Napoleon Dynamite* into the team's film-session reel.**

Kaminsky's fellow frontcourt starters bring other dimensions to the offense. Hayes is the Big Ten's second-most-efficient returning player on isolation possessions, according to Synergy; he was also the Badgers' best free throw creator last season, drawing 7.3 fouls per 40 minutes played. And Dekker has grown two inches to 6' 9" and added 15 pounds. (He now weighs 230.) He gives Wisconsin a wing who can make threes and overwhelm opposing small forwards when he attacks the basket. He played his way up the NBA draft boards at this summer's LeBron James Skills Academy, where he exhibited more confidence than he did in NCAA tournament appearances against Baylor and Arizona, and he says he's learned to stop second-guessing himself before making offensive moves.

NET RESULT

Butch (with Bucky and Scheidler) spent decades as a Final Four spectator, but died before his son's breakthrough in 2014.

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (DEKKER); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BO, KAMINSKY); DAVID STLUKA (BUTCH)

FORWARD PROGRESS
Kaminsky (above) broke out during the 2014 Big Dance while Dekker (top left) boosted his confidence at summer skills camps.

Wisconsin is also the rare team on which nearly everyone can make threes. Hayes has extended his range during the off-season (he took no three-point shots in 2013–14), and now the Badgers' likely starting lineup will have five three-point options—and eight of their nine projected rotation players are three-point threats.

Having multiple skilled shooters results in ideal spacing to run Ryan's signature Swing offense—a continuity system that creates ball-side triangles complemented by weakside screening and cutting, that allows all players to shift between the perimeter and the blocks. The Swing is designed to pull defenders out of their comfort zones. The Badgers can either strike quickly or spend the greater part of the shot clock probing for a smart look, rotating the ball and reformulating triangles. When five highly skilled players are making the right reads—and mixing in the occasional wing ball screen—defending it is more difficult than solving a riddle. A riddle, at least, has a fixed solution. (You go on red and stop on green when you're eating a watermelon.)

WHEN AN Oct. 8 practice reaches the time slot allocated for post moves, every player goes through Ryan's established series of five skills. He calls out the names: the Moses (a power drop step), the Dominique (a shot fake and step under), the Bernie (a shoulder-fake turnaround), the Sikma (a reverse pivot and jump shot) and the McHale (a hook). Asked if he has considered using more recent references, Ryan says, "We thought about changing a couple, just so the modern guys [would know the names], and then I said, Nah, the heck with it." When Ryan talks about toughness, his anecdotes tend to be from his Chester, Pa., childhood in the 1950s and '60s. "I don't know how realistic it is that Bo was taking 20 charges in a game on the playground in Chester," senior captain Josh Gasser says, "but he claims he did it."

Ryan can be so overtly old-school that it obscures the fact that the Badgers are strategically *progressive*. He doesn't reference Synergy stats or even mention the Internet much, but he reacted to a turnover in a transition drill in practice by saying that a mistake like that "brings down our points per possession." By charting PPP in 10-possession stretches in practice, and having their performance evaluated on those terms, the Badgers grasp the value of every trip up the court. It's not a fluke that they've ranked in the top 20 in overall adjusted efficiency in seven out of the past eight seasons.

SWING SHIFTS
Jackson is the maestro of the Badgers' constantly rotating offense, which is designed to keep defenders off balance.

When five highly skilled players are switching positions and making the right reads, **defending Ryan's Swing offense is more difficult than solving a riddle.**

Ryan has also optimized his approach to the most valuable shot in the game. A 2012 study of college shooting data by statistician Ken Pomeroy concluded that there was little defenses could do to consistently affect opponents' three-point field goal *percentages*, and that the best way to consistently limit opponents' three-point production was to limit *attempts*. The Badgers' defense—a version of the Pack Line that prioritizes preventing rhythm threes in half-court and transition—has ranked in the lowest seven nationally in ratio of 3FGA/FGA allowed for each of the past three seasons. Wisconsin's opponents took just 25.3% of their shots from beyond the arc in '13–14, while the Badgers took 39.1% of their shots as threes. They almost always hold the advantage in long-rang attempts.

Wisconsin also understands the value of oversized shooters. A 2014 study of the past 14 seasons of NBA data by Justin Willard of GotBuckets.com concluded that three-point-shooting centers—due to their effect on spacing and pulling would-be rim protectors away from the hoop—have *twice as much* positive impact on offensive efficiency as three-point-shooting point guards. Three-point-shooting big men have *two-thirds more* positive impact than three-point-shooting perimeter players. Kaminsky attempted 98 long-range shots last season (making 37), and Dekker, playing mostly the four spot, took 129 (making 42).

When asked about the devastating conclusion of that Final Four game last April—Kentucky hit just two threes all game, but one was Aaron Harrison's improbable, go-ahead bomb over Gasser with 5.7 seconds left, and then Jackson missed a pull-up at the buzzer—Ryan brings up another study. "We broke down every last possession over the years where we had to score to tie it or win it," he says, "and we have some phenomenal record of, like, 68-point-something of the time being successful, and 90% [of the shots were] in an area we wanted." Jackson had previously hit two game-winners on similar attempts, and his pull-up was "absolutely" what Ryan wanted. That Jackson got hit on

AL TIELEMANS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

the right hand, had to alter his angle midair and awkwardly bank it? That was unfortunate. "Over time it's [gone] more our way than the other way," Ryan says. He knows that as long as the Badgers keep making the optimal choices, the odds will remain in their favor.

ODDS ARE that Butch wouldn't have analyzed Jackson's shot quite the same way. First, had he lived long enough to attend his 38th Final Four, Butch would've been too nervous to even *see* Jackson's shot, or much of anything that preceded it. The game was too close, the setting—nearly 80,000 fans in a 2.3-million-square-foot stadium—too overwhelming. Butch was more comfortable in small venues. Bo's oldest daughter, Megan, has a cherished image of her grandfather, from after Platteville won it all in 1991: He's beaming as he watches players pour cans of Bud Light over Bo's head. You could get away with that in D-III. If Bo wins Wisconsin's first national championship since 1941, on April 6, it will be in a football stadium in Indianapolis, where the NCAA's corporate police will confiscate any Bud Light and force the Badgers to party with an officially sponsored nonalcoholic beverage.

The old days, when Butch and Bo started traveling to Final Fours, were quaint. They'd pack three guys into a hotel room—their friend Jim Scheidler, who'd later become Butch's de facto caretaker, was relegated to a spot on the floor. Butch would fly out with meat and bread from LaSpada's in Chester and assemble hoagies in the room on the first night. They had a Thursday-night dinner with a cake for Butch's birthday and a guest list that expanded as Bo's coaching tree grew.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL '14 '15 PREVIEW

WISCONSIN

Every year produced a story. Butch's second Final Four was in Atlanta, in 1977. They were nobodies—just an assistant from Wisconsin, his pops and his friend—on a bus full of coaches headed from their hotel to The Omni, where Marquette and North Carolina would soon tip off for the national championship. It was raining, and the bus was stopped in traffic. Coaches complained to the driver about being late. They quieted down when someone on the bus started singing "A Rainy Night in Georgia." The singer was Butch. He stood up and willed some fellow passengers into singing along. He then informed them that it was time to get off the bus and walk to the arena. Plenty of them followed him out into the rain, toward the title game, trusting that there was not much farther to go. □

Women's Sco
WOMEN'S
UCONN
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uting Reports

TOP 5 1 UCONN 2 SOUTH CAROLINA 3 NOTRE DAME 4 TENNESSEE 5 TEXAS A&M

DOG DYNASTY Stokes (41) had the upper hand against Notre Dame's Mabrey (23) last April in the Huskies' second straight finals win.

Photograph by
David E. Klutho
Sports Illustrated

COLLEGE BASKETBALL '14 '15 PREVIEW

It's that time of year when clocks get reset, holiday songs get airtime and UConn gets the preseason No. 1 ranking. But to win their fifth title in seven seasons, the Huskies will have to overcome a quartet of worthy challengers

Tale of Two Teams

Geno Auriemma admits he is coaching two teams this year. The first has a trio of All-Americas led by forward **Breanna Stewart**, the reigning player of the year, who won a gold medal with Team USA at the world championships last month in Istanbul. There's also wing **Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis**, the nation's purest three-point shooter, and **Moriah Jefferson**, one of the country's top point guards.

Auriemma's other unit consists of four freshmen and two sophomores who must learn the nuances of UConn's combo high post–triangle offense to keep pace with the veterans. One of them should pick it up quickly: freshman **Kia Nurse**, a 6-foot guard who was the second-youngest player in Istanbul, where she averaged 6.9 points for Canada.

UConn is favored to threepeat as national champ, despite losing two starters (and first-round WNBA picks) in center Stefanie Dolson and guard Bria Hartley. Dolson's replacement in the post will likely be **Kiah Stokes**, a dazzling athlete and solid passer who earned more court time late last season because she was so strong defensively. "Can we get a consistently high level of energy and performance from Kiah?" Auriemma asks. "If we do, I don't think we will miss a beat."

That's bad news for the rest of the country.

—Richard Deitsch

CONNECTICUT

COACH GENO AURIEMMA (30TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 40-0
AMERICAN ATHLETIC 18-0

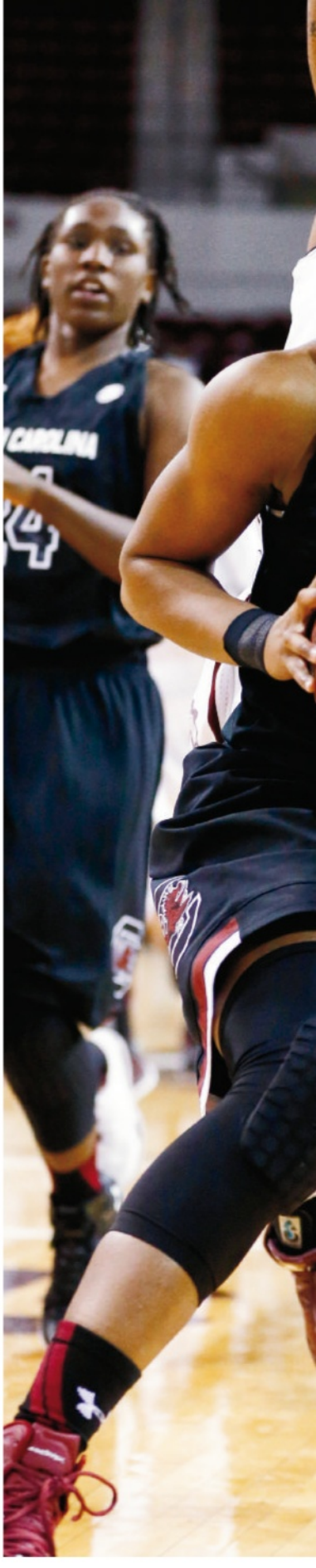
Lineup With 2013-14 Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG
PG	Moriah Jefferson* 5'7" Jr.	10.0	3.4	4.9
SG	Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis* 5'11" Sr.	13.4	5.4	2.6
SF	Morgan Tuck 6'2" Soph.	7.5	2.4	1.0
PF	Breanna Stewart* 6'4" Jr.	19.4	8.1	3.1
C	Kiah Stokes 6'3" Sr.	4.5	7.1	0.9
G	Kia Nurse 6'0" Fr.	25.9	8.8	4.9

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 324

Shots blocked by the Huskies last season, an NCAA record. It was the first time in school history that three players—Breanna Stewart (110), Stefanie Dolson (93) and Kiah Stokes (89)—each had more than 50 blocks.



DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (JEFFERSON)

A crafty scorer, Mitchell must help develop other threats.

2

SOUTH CAROLINA

COACH DAWN STALEY (7TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 29-5 SEC 14-2

Getting Offensive

When **Dawn Staley** says, "We've got a lot of work to do," eyes start rolling, because most coaches would love to be in her position. Her top six scorers are back, and she *added* three McDonald's All-Americans, including *Parade* high school player of the year **A'ja Wilson**, a 6' 5" swingwoman from Hopkins, S.C., who can play all over the floor. Yes, Staley says with a laugh, practice has been "enjoyable."

Junior **Tiffany Mitchell**, the reigning SEC player of the year, will lead all of this talent. The 5' 9" guard is skilled at creating her own shot but has to learn "how to play with the weapons surrounding her and understand when to turn it on," Staley says. "We can't rely on Tiff to wear the S on her chest every night or we'll be easily defended." Senior forward **Aleighsa Welch** provides consistent scoring, as does **Alaina Coates**, the 2013–14 SEC freshman of the year, who averaged 12.3 points and 8.4 rebounds in just 19.6 minutes.

Staley has built her reputation on D, so she spent the off-season talking offense with colleagues. Her biggest takeaway: "In previous years we had to know exactly where our shots were coming from," she says. "Now we have kids who can make plays in the moment, and we can become less predictable."

That won't cause eye-rolling from opposing coaches. Just fear. *—Lindsay Schnell*

Lineup With 2013-14 Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG
PG	Tiffany Mitchell* 5' 9" Jr.	15.5	5.6	3.5
SG	Khadijah Sessions* 5' 8" Jr.	7.2	1.6	2.7
PF	Aleighsa Welch* 6' 0" Sr.	13.7	7.6	0.3
C	Alaina Coates 6' 4" Soph.	12.3	8.4	0.3
C	Elem Ibiam* 6' 4" Sr.	9.5	6.1	0.4
G-F	A'ja Wilson 6' 5" Fr.	34.4	13.9	2.2

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 29

Most wins for South Carolina since the 1979–80 team had 30. The Gamecocks won their **first SEC regular-season title and received their first NCAA tournament No. 1 seed.** Tiffany Mitchell was also the program's first SEC player of the year.

ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP (MITCHELL); CHRIS KEANE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILSON)

PAUL SANCYA/AP (LOYD)

Young Gunners

Muffet McGraw was hoping to push her team harder this fall, but she's a realist. With three new starters and seven underclassmen, the Notre Dame coach would plan her practice schedule for the week, she says, "and then I'd end up erasing half of it." The Irish have been the national runners-up in three of the last four seasons—and their roster is built for another deep run—but the new parts need time to jell.

Notre Dame's Princeton offense relies on spacing and quick cuts, and few players are quicker than All-America junior guard **Jewell Loyd**, who's deadly both on the run and from midrange. While Loyd can get up shots at will, McGraw cautions, "If she has to score 20 every night, I don't think we will be successful." That makes the offensive development of sophomore point guard **Lindsay Allen**, junior wing **Michaela Mabrey** and sophomore forward **Taya Reimer** critical. Reimer, the daughter of former NBA forward Ben Davis, came in this fall as the most improved player both mentally and physically. She'll be joined in the frontcourt by 6' 3" freshman forward **Brianna Turner**, the 2013–14 Gatorade player of the year, who should be among the nation's leaders in blocks.

Once the pieces fall into place, the Irish can plan a fifth straight trip to the Final Four. —R.D.

3

NOTRE DAME

COACH MUFFET MCGRAW (28TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 37-1 ACC 16-0

Lineup With 2013-14 Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG
PG	Lindsay Allen* 5'7" Soph.	6.2	2.4	3.9
G	Michaela Mabrey 5'10" Jr.	8.1	1.3	2.2
G	Jewell Loyd* 5'10" Jr.	18.6	6.5	2.1
PF	Brianna Turner 6'3" Fr.	20.9	11.4	4.2
PF	Taya Reimer 6'3" Soph.	7.4	4.6	1.6
G	Madison Cable 5'11" Sr.	5.5	3.4	1.0

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 5

USA Basketball gold medals for Brianna Turner, after she captained the U-18 team to the FIBA America's championship in August. The U.S. has a 37-2 record over the past three years when Turner has been in the lineup.

The Lady Vols rely on Harrison down low.

TIM GANGLOFF/CSM/LANDOV (HARRISON); JIM BROWN/USA TODAY SPORTS (MASSENGALE)

4

TENNESSEE

COACH HOLLY WARLICK (3RD SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 29-6 SEC 13-3

High Expectations

The only center who played significant minutes last season, 6' 3" **Isabelle Harrison**, will again be the center of the Lady Vols' offense. She's ready to build on her outstanding junior year, when she broke Chamique Holdsclaw's school record for double doubles (18) and hit an SEC-best 57.7% of her shots. "We're going to play a lot of different combinations," says coach **Holly Warlick**. "Izzy has to be consistent, because she's our glue."

Senior **Ariel Massengale**, who was leading the team in scoring and assists when she went out with a head injury last January, will direct the attack; a year on the bench has helped her better understand the flow of offense. Even after 6' 6" Mercedes Russell, the No. 1 recruit from the class of 2013 and the team's tallest player, announced she would redshirt this season because of chronic foot injuries, Tennessee has loads of experience (five players with at least 19 starts last season) and height (eight players 6' 2" or taller). With all of that length, Warlick envisions lots of sets with four perimeter players: "We're big *and* we can handle the ball, so we're going to [play] a little differently."

The Lady Vols haven't been to the Final Four since 2008—the longest stretch in program history. Their tallest roster ever will lift them out of that drought. —L.S.

Lineup With 2013-14 Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG
PG	Ariel Massengale* 5' 7" Sr.	12.5	3.2	5.8
SG	Andraya Carter* 5' 9" Soph.	6.9	2.7	2.3
F	Bashaara Graves* 6' 2" Jr.	9.3	6.8	1.2
F	Cierra Burdick* 6' 2" Sr.	8.7	7.3	2.0
C	Isabelle Harrison* 6' 3" Sr.	13.6	9.3	1.0
F	Jasmine Jones 6' 2" Jr.	4.8	3.5	0.9

*Returning starter

Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 70.7

Percentage of scoring that returns to Tennessee for 2014-15. **The Lady Vols' 75.5 points in SEC games led the conference last season.** They also bring back 83.2% of their rebounds, 81.7% of their assists and 79.5% of their steals.

Short Game Strategy

It has been four seasons since the Aggies won a national championship, but they're still reaping the recruiting benefits. "I've never had this deep of a team at the guard position," says coach **Gary Blair**. "I can roll any of them out there."

Led by a pair of **Courtneys**—**Walker** and **Williams**, both juniors—Texas A&M will put four guards on the floor at times and apply more pressure defensively than ever. The 5' 8" Walker operates mostly inside the arc, using her quickness and strength to get taller defenders off balance, though she's trying to add a three-point shot to her arsenal. As a freshman, Walker took just two treys, making one; last year she made 12 of 33. The 6' 1" Williams can play four positions but was even worse than Walker from long range, hitting just 19 of 69 shots (27.5%). "Everybody is afraid of our guards slashing and attacking," Blair says, "but it's our job to make defenders play us honest instead of sagging back."

The post is more of a work in progress, but at least A&M is long on options. Blair says each member of his "three-headed monster"—6' 3" sophomore **Jada Terry**, 6' 5" freshman **Khaalia Hillsman** and 6' 7" junior **Rachel Mitchell**—will shoot 55% from the field. "We'll go with the hot hand," Blair says. —L.S.

5

TEXAS A&M

COACH GARY BLAIR (12TH SEASON)
2013-14 RECORD 27-9 SEC 13-3

Lineup With 2013-14 Stats

		PPG	RPG	APG
PG	Courtney Walker* 5' 8" Jr.	15.6	4.2	2.5
SG	Jordan Jones* 5' 6" Jr.	7.1	7.5	7.3
G-F	Courtney Williams* 6' 1" Jr.	13.9	5.5	2.1
PF	Achiri Ade* 6' 1" Sr.	6.9	6.8	0.4
C	Rachel Mitchell 6' 7" Jr.	1.2	2.0	0.0
G	Tori Scott 5' 10" Sr.	6.9	2.6	0.7

*Returning starter Team leader

TELLING NUMBER 261

Assists by Jordan Jones last season (7.3 per game), which **led the SEC, ranked third nationally and set an Aggies record**. She ranked second in the SEC in assist-to-turnover ratio (2.35) and third in steals per game (2.3).

JASON GETZ/AP (WALKER); DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (STEWART)

All-America Team

PLAYER	SCHOOL	YEAR

PG **Tiffany Mitchell** *South Carolina, Jr.*
The Charlotte native was the only player to be ranked in the top 20 in the SEC in points, rebounds, assists and steals last season. Mitchell traveled to Russia in June, where she led the U.S. team to a gold medal at the FIBA 3×3 world championships.

G **Jewell Loyd** *Notre Dame, Jr.*
Her demeanor is icy cool at all times, but the 5' 10" ACC preseason player of the year still knows how to wow a crowd, whether it's by hitting a clutch three-pointer, slashing to the hoop or converting a Jewelly Oop, her signature bank shot off a lob pass.

PF **Breanna Stewart** *UConn, Jr.*
There aren't many more accolades for Stewart to collect—and she still has two more seasons in Storrs. Expect her to once again be the consensus national player of the year and to be named the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player for the third consecutive season.

C **Isabelle Harrison** *Tennessee, Sr.*
The 10th of 12 children, Harrison knows how to stand out from a crowd. She scored in double figures in 31 of 35 games in 2013–14 and had seven consecutive double doubles, a Lady Vols record. Harrison has shot 51.6% from the field during her Tennessee career.

C **Elizabeth Williams** *Duke, Sr.*
A three-time All-America, the 6' 3" Williams has consistently been one of the nation's top shot blockers. With 103 more rejections she'll break the ACC mark of 434, held by former Blue Devil Alison Bales. Williams averaged 13.8 points, 7.6 rebounds and 3.1 blocks last season.

The versatile Stewart can play all five positions.

Do Ask, Do Tell

COLLEGE BASKETBALL '14 '15 PREVIEW

Max Lenox was born to a crack-addicted black mother and raised by two white gay fathers. How did he end up a much-admired captain of the Army basketball team? It's an American family story

BY S.L. PRICE

LEADING BY EXAMPLE
Lenox (with ball) is a Black Knights captain for the second straight season despite not being in the starting lineup.

Photograph by
Tim Clayton
For Sports Illustrated

HERE IS A NIGHTMARE. On Feb. 12, 1992, at 2:34 a.m., a boy was born in a Philadelphia hospital. The mother, 25 years old and with five children already, had been an alcoholic since she was 14; during this pregnancy she had spent most of her welfare checks on crack. Hospital staffers assumed the worst: that the pus oozing from the newborn's eyes indicated chlamydia, that the tenseness in his body was a sign of withdrawal. It was no shock when tests confirmed his exposure to cocaine.

Two of his brothers would never see 30. When the boy was seven, his mother would die in a house fire set by her oldest son, then 16, who crashed through a second-story window to escape. Within minutes witnesses would hear the woman screaming as the flames closed in.

She was not a good mother. Let us say that. But she gave this baby a chance—albeit slim—when she put him up for adoption the day after his birth. Black skin and drug exposure are disqualifying traits for many adults looking to adopt. Which is to say that no one was clucking over this baby and predicting West Point. No one was pegging him as a future captain of Army's basketball team. No one was asserting, as his military high school coach does now, "He's got the stuff to be a general."

Still, the infant who would come to be called Max Lenox had a few advantages. At seven-plus pounds and 21 inches, he possessed a puzzling robustness for what was then called a "crack baby." And not only was there a couple desperate to adopt him,

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but the prospective parents were also financially stable, devoted to each other and determined to give the boy a safe and loving home. From the perspective of the unwanted, this was winning the lottery.

For the couple, though, the baby was a dice hurl for which even the most sympathetic soul had little hope. "I figured he'd be learning-disabled and they'd struggle with him," says Sandy Deutsch, the North Carolina social worker who conducted the home study for that adoption and learned of Max's achievements only recently. "Now he's at West Point?" she said. "Oh, my God. That almost makes me choke up. My God. That is beyond. . . ." It took a bit for her to gather herself.

HERE IS a triumph. Yes, Max Lenox is a senior at the U.S. Military Academy. But wait: His path there has not been storybook pat. Lenox will be the first to tell you he is no genius. He flunked two classes as a freshman and almost got kicked out; like Gen. George Patton, Lenox is a "turnback," a cadet forced to repeat his plebe year and to graduate late. Last year, in a class of 1,084, he was ranked No. 903.

As for basketball, he and Army coach Zach Spiker butted heads until reaching a kind of détente. After a Patriot League all-rookie campaign in which Lenox scored perhaps the most dramatic basket in the history of the Army-Navy rivalry, he spent two years watching his playing time shrink. This year he figures to log far more minutes as the backup point guard, but that's hardly how he envisioned his final season. "If I play how I'm capable," Lenox still says, "I don't think there's anyone better than me."

Yet even after such diminishment, even on a campus filled with former all-staters and future Rhodes scholars, the 6-foot, 200-pound Lenox inspires a kind of awe. His teammates describe him as "rare" and "very special." Even though he averaged only 6.0 minutes last season and appeared in just a third of the Black Knights' games, he was reelected captain. The academy's sole stated mission is to make each cadet a "leader of character." Nobody on that stony promontory above the Hudson River is granted authority lightly. "I'll be lucky if I do half the stuff Max does, become half the leader he is," says sophomore forward Tanner Omlid. "I want to be like him."

This is not just a West Point thing. "I still look up to Max," says American University guard John Schoof, a former high school teammate of Lenox's. Holy Cross coach Milan Brown, who gave Lenox his first scholarship offer, at Mount St. Mary's, refers to his "huge, high character. I'm a father of two little girls. Ten, 12 years from now I'm hoping somebody like him walks in my door with my daughter."

So here is a question: What made that—*him*—happen? Part of the answer, of course, lies in whatever Lenox inherited from the birth mother he never knew. But much is due to a family dynamic that, from the start, made him navigate fault lines of race, sex and religion, upending stereotypes left and right. Much is due to the couple that, three Junes ago, surrendered him to West Point in the brutally efficient exercise known as Reception Day: exactly 90 seconds in the morning to tell your child goodbye; a few hours of dazed wandering on campus as the cadet-candidate gets processed, drilled and shorn; a teary-eyed gathering with all the other parents in an outdoor grandstand for one last look.

Nobody is granted authority lightly at West Point. Says Omlid, **"I'll be lucky if I do half the stuff Max does."**

At 6 p.m., Max emerged through one of Washington Hall's sally ports, raggedly marching onto the thick grass of the venerable parade ground, The Plain, with more than 1,200 other plebes, hair tight, uniform just so, his past unknown to everyone but the two white men who could barely glance at each other without losing it.

The band played "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." The men tried to find their son's face in the crowd. He stepped closer. They thought of their dead parents and their families, all bitterness gone. Then Dave Lenox turned to his husband, Nathan Merrells, to ask a bigger, maybe easier question, the same one that Americans awash in the most startlingly swift social change in the nation's history have been asking ever since.

"How did we," Dave said, "end up here?"

ONE SATURDAY in the spring of his plebe year, after surviving all manner of trials, Max Lenox hit a tattoo parlor across from Madison Square Garden and had a quotation, in cursive, inked over his heart. Nathan had sent it to him the year before, when Max was at Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy and feeling alone and anything but successful. Max read the words each morning before leaving his room. He can recite them without pause:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.

That the words were written by a white Welshman, the egomaniacal military genius T.E. Lawrence, mattered not at all. If anything, they were a reminder that Max had known such a dangerous man all his life. Dave Lenox's dream was far smaller than conquering the Turks, but that didn't make it any less powerful, or acting on it less bruising. People did get hurt. But Max was the dream, and Dave made him come true.

Today Dave, 56, is president and CEO of the Special Olympics in the state of Washington. He's one of those people who never take no for an answer, who face down surly waiters or a cancer diagnosis with equal aplomb. In the end, as Nathan says, "he always gets what he wants."

And what Dave wanted, since he was 10,

FATHERS' DAY
Max says he was never prouder of his family than the day Dave (right) and Nathan (left) were married.

was a picture-perfect home. He'd had that in Kansas City, Mo.: two older brothers, a father who worked as a railroad switchman, a housewife mom. Some ugly seeds had been dropped into Dave's consciousness—all of his grandparents hailed from Barry County, Mo., deep in the Ozarks, where blacks found in the county after sundown risked a lynching, and his father refused to drive through certain parts of Kansas City because he could, as he put it, "smell the black." But to young Dave he was a hero.

Then everything changed. Dave's father died of lung cancer, his brothers grew up and moved on and his mother took the dicey job of IRS auditor, packing a pistol and drawing the curtains just in case. As a teenager Dave hustled to keep a sense of domesticity: He made sure his mom showed up for school events. He cooked dinner each night and set the table "so it would be," he says, "this typical family thing."

Dave wanted kids, soccer practices, homework hassles. Perhaps it's hard to imagine now, when same-sex marriage is legal in 32 states and *Modern Family* has mainstreamed gay fatherhood, but back then there was only one way to achieve all that. And when, after a failed marriage to a woman, Dave accepted at 26 that he preferred men, he figured his shot at "typical" was gone. "When you realize you're gay, you have to put that all away," he says. "Everything's been blown out of the water. It's, *I have no bearings now.*"

It took a year for his depression to lift. In 1987, after Dave moved to Parkersburg, W.Va., to run Special Olympics in the state, he met Nathan, an ad designer. They fell for each other instantly, but "we were both determined to do it the right way, the slow way—as a dating relationship," Nathan says. "We would follow, sort of, the 'straight' rules."

Both were churchgoers, but Nathan's fundamentalist Baptist faith was a straitjacket. His parents, Harold and Midge, raised him and two siblings not far from Parkersburg in the tiny village of Little Hocking, Ohio: church three times a week, nightly if there was a revival. Homosexuality was an abomination. Dad was a mailman; Mom, a Sunday school teacher. "I didn't know any black people," Nathan says.

Dave and Nathan's plan to take it slow fell apart when Dave, cutting Nathan's grass, slipped and sliced off two toes in the lawnmower. Dave needed to keep the leg elevated and couldn't drive; Nathan invited him to move in. Nathan's parents figured Dave was just a roommate. They didn't blink when, in 1989, Nathan gave up a great job to move when Dave took over the North Carolina Special Olympics chapter in Raleigh.

The dominant force in Tar Heel politics then was Jesse Helms, the arch-conservative U.S. senator who famously described gays as "weak, morally sick wretches." Sodomy was against the law. Until Dave and Nathan met a lesbian couple who had adopted through Lutheran Family Services, they weren't even thinking about becoming parents. Then, Dave says, "I was, like, *This is completely doable. Game on.*"

In the summer of 1991, having learned that he had to approach adoption as a single man, Dave contacted Joyce Gourley, director of adoptions for LFS in the Carolinas. LFS founder Bill Brittain had dedicated himself—at times to the chagrin of the Lutherans' traditional wing—to placing children in stable homes wherever they could be found. Gourley took Dave's paperwork. For the next two months he heard nothing.

As prospective adopters, single men were then considered too undependable, too lacking in "maternal instinct." But no one was more suspect than gay men; they were often equated with pedophiles or imagined to be trying to "recruit" children. There seemed to be no precedent for a single gay man—and certainly not a male couple—adopting in North Carolina. With each passing week Dave assumed the worst. Finally, fed up and fortified by a few glasses of wine, he called Gourley one weekend and left a blistering message.

"I perceive that the problem may be that you think that I'm gay, and here's the deal: I am," Dave said. "But we've decided that

VICTORIA WILL FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

there's going to be a child in our family, and I just want to know whether you're a part of that process. If not? Let's just move on."

First thing Monday morning, the phone rang. The home study would begin immediately, Gourley said. A social worker would be calling. Dave had to ask: Why the change? "We were waiting for you to come out of the closet," Gourley said. "We can't place a child in a home where the parents are afraid. Trying to hide your sexuality won't work. It's hard enough to raise kids under the best of circumstances."

MARGINALS, OUTCASTS: Really, they were made for each other. By the early 1990s AIDS had devastated and further stigmatized the gay community. Meanwhile, an avalanche of cheap, high-octane, smokable cocaine had ravaged black urban centers, tripping alarms about what *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer called a "bio-underclass" of crack-exposed infants facing "a life of certain suffering, of probable deviance, of permanent inferiority." Boston University president John Silber speculated that "crack babies" wouldn't develop "consciousness of God," and experts predicted a crime wave when such "super-predators" came of age.

Dave and Nathan checked off the boxes anyway: Yes, they'd take a baby of any race, and yes, one exposed to drugs in utero. They did draw the line at a child already displaying symptoms of addiction or impairment. They wanted the hope, at least, that things might turn out O.K.

Technically Dave applied as a single parent, but from the start LFS evaluated him and Nathan as a couple. "I had to make sure that Nathan and Dave were in it for the long term," Deutsch says. "But you could tell they wanted to do what was necessary, and it wasn't about enhancing their lives. It was about making a home for a kid."

When the call came, on Feb. 13, 1992, from a Philadelphia agency charged with finding healthy children for single adoptive parents, Dave and Nathan were anything but ready. Nathan had always figured that something would derail Dave's scheme, and *c'est la vie*. His relationship with his

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own father was so strained that he assumed he'd be a horrible dad. Now it was happening. Dave rushed to the airport. Nathan scrambled to get the house ready.

By the time Dave landed in Philly, the birth mother's case history had been amplified. Dave wasn't surprised that she admitted crack use, but the agency unloaded more details about Corrine Cottom: alcoholism, a history of mental illness, a half-pack-a-day cigarette habit, and bleeding during her last trimester. Then there was the pus in the baby's eyes, and a "tox screen" confirming cocaine in his system. "Associated risks," read the affidavit Dave was handed, could include "delayed development in all areas, learning disabilities, sudden infant death and/or mental retardation."

Dave called Deutsch in a panic, late on a Monday night. "What's the first rule you learn?" she said. "Birth mothers will lie." Deutsch went over Max's vital measures, his full-term birth. The pus turned out to be conjunctivitis. The tenseness? Who knows? No baby's perfect. "Go get your son," she said, "and stop bothering me in the middle of the night."

Nathan met them at the gate in Raleigh. With Max in a carrier, they peeled off to the side of the jetway and crumpled to the floor. "Here's our son," Dave said. Nathan cried, Dave cried too, and the two kneeling white men mashed the black baby between them in a hug. None of the deplaning passengers, it's safe to say, had seen that before.

It was all new. Dave had been out of the closet for years—his mother had shrugged, his brothers ranged from wary to hostile—but at 30, Nathan still hadn't told his parents. Now he had no choice: They were coming to town. He FedExed a letter to the church camp they were attending in Florida and dropped all three bombs at once: I'm gay, you have a new grandson, he's black. "We didn't hear from them for a while," Nathan says.

His mother was crushed, his father aghast. A couple weeks later they checked into a Raleigh hotel. When Nathan took Max to see his grandparents, Harold inveighed against Nathan and Dave's "sin," and Nathan picked up his son and left.

The birth mother could rescind the adoption anytime until her rights as a parent were officially terminated at a hearing 10 weeks later; whenever the phone rang Dave and Nathan were sure it was Corrine calling to take her son back. A Philadelphia judge removed that threat at 11 a.m. on April 30, but the adoption wouldn't become official—complete with the chid's name change from Corey Mark Cottom to Max Lenox—until August 1993.

At nine months Max took to his feet; by the end of that day he was running. Nine months later the Philadelphia agency called. Corrine was putting Max's little brother up for adoption. This time Nathan was the one who pushed for it. "We have to do this," he said. "I couldn't look at Max if we had the chance to take his brother and didn't." But Corrine changed her mind. In 1995, Dave went back to Philadelphia and returned with Erin, a baby girl, black, from a different birth mother.

Dave and Nathan say they began to notice a pattern: People could be brutal, but then a countervailing wind usually blew. When their Episcopal church in Raleigh refused to baptize Max, another church, Pullen Memorial Baptist, welcomed them. After their effort to join the neighborhood swimming pool was rejected because, they were told, "We define family traditionally," their neighbors rallied and pressured the community association board. Max, Erin and their two dads squeaked in by one vote.

Nathan wouldn't give up on his parents. After Dave transferred to the Special Olympics' international office in Wash-

Dave and Nathan checked off the boxes. **Yes, they'd take a baby of any race, and yes, one exposed to drugs in utero.**

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MAX LENOX

ington, D.C., and the family moved to Fairfax, Va., Nathan loaded the minivan and set off on the seven-hour drive to Belpre, Ohio. "Of course you know Max," Nathan said, stepping into his parents' home. "Mom, Dad: This is your granddaughter, Erin."

His father didn't say hello. The first words out of Harold's mouth were, "These children are not our grandchildren."

It was a gut punch. But before Nathan could sag, his mother spoke. Not once in 36 years had he seen her disagree with her husband. There'd have been hell to pay.

"Well, they may not be yours," Midge said, "but they're mine."

IT WAS strange, really, how the fear just leaked away. The first days and months Dave and Nathan kept an eye out for any effect of Corrine's drug abuse on Max, but within a year his tensing had stopped. He grew up moving so hard and fast, and he picked up sports—gymnastics, swimming, soccer, tennis—so easily. Yes, Max was diagnosed with ADHD, but intelligence tests found him average to above, and besides, half of suburbia seemed to be popping Adderall.

Dave and Nathan settled deep into a leafy Fairfax cul-de-sac, packing lunches, worrying about traffic, teachers and TV, nursing the vague hope that their son wouldn't turn out gay. "Not that there's anything wrong with that," Dave likes to say. But this was the late 1990s: Don't Ask, Don't Tell was the official military policy, and Dave's oldest brother had broken off relations with him over what he called Dave's lifestyle. "From our perspective, [if you were] straight, the world was your oyster," Dave says.

Since then studies have appeared that challenge the crack-baby myth. It's not that cocaine use doesn't damage exposed babies: They display lower birth weight and, later, a smaller caudate nucleus, the brain area that controls executive function, memory and learning. But according to studies by Dr. Hallam Hurt, a professor of pediatrics at Penn's Perelman School of Medicine who followed 219 lower-income kids born at Philadelphia's Einstein Medical Center between 1989 and '92—when Max was born cross-town—those traits "have not translated to clinically significant outcomes."

Half of Hurt's tested cohort had been exposed to crack in utero, and half had not. By age 19 the two groups displayed no significant difference in IQ, performance on a standardized achievement test, high school graduation rates, or drug-use or arrest rates. Yet by age one, both groups lagged behind nonexposed middle-class kids—especially in IQ.

"What we've found is that poverty poses a greater threat to a child with gestational cocaine exposure than the exposure to cocaine in utero," Hurt says. "It seems . . . that environment trumps the exposure to cocaine." Hurt's study also found that children raised "in an enriched or nurturing home"—regardless of income—were more likely to do well than those who were not.

"Crack doesn't do anything to the fetus," says Carl Bell, a doctor of psychiatry and public health who has practiced on Chicago's South Side since the 1970s, "but [it was] the drug that caused the most child-protective issues for children. I've never seen heroin addicts—and for that matter alcoholics— just flat-out abandon their children. But the crack-cocaine people do."

Max Lenox, of course, is a sample size of one. He was exposed to crack but immediately moved to a nurturing environment. "He would never have had this life without those two men," says Deutsch. "If he'd been white, he would've had a shot. But as a black kid? With what we think is a drug-addicted mom? He wouldn't have made it."

As a boy Max knew few details of his background. He was teased some about his dads, got into a few fights, but, he says, "I was always a pretty happy person. My parents were good to me. I'd see parents fighting when I went to my friends' houses and think, *All these people are getting divorced . . . and my house is good. We're all happy.* I never wished for any different. I kind of took pride in that I was different."

Max was teased about his dads, but he says, **"My parents were good to me. I kind of took pride in that I was different."**

It helped that he was usually the tallest, fastest, best athlete too. At 10, Max was playing local U.S. Tennis Association tournaments against 14-year-olds. But he'd picked up basketball the year before, and soon every other sport fell away. John Schoof, who would be his teammate at W.T. Woodson High, can still see Max in a summer league playoff game, coolly loping upcourt as time expires. "At the buzzer Max hit a pull-up three to tie it," Schoof says. "We were, like, 10 years old. None of us are shooting threes: I could barely get it to the basket.

"He wasn't a freak athlete, but he was really quick. He was stronger, and he scored a lot; at the same time, he was one of the best passers. But more than anything, he just wanted to win."

By 12, Max was refusing to take the Adderall; never found it helped, anyway. He emerged as a rising talent in the D.C. area, an AAU star known for unselfishness and for twists that would soon grow into dreadlocks. Neither Dave nor Nathan had a sports background; one Christmas, Max gave Nathan *Basketball for Dummies*. And nothing, Dave and Nathan say, taught them how *not* to parent more than the rabid, backbiting AAU scene. Of course, few AAU parents had seen a family like theirs, either. Double takes, puzzled looks—Max's teammates loved to see the nickel drop. Black kid, two white men: *What the . . . ?*

When Max was 11, his AAU coach, Rocky Carter, was on the phone with a coaching buddy, a black man, gabbing about Max's vast potential. He mentioned the two-dad thing, and a moment later he was hearing only silence. "Hello?" Carter said.

"Oh, I'm here," said his friend coldly, "but I'd rather not talk about it anymore."

Carter says, "He didn't approve of that lifestyle and thought Max should be raised by his own race." The friendship died. "It crushed me," Carter says.

As it often does, AAU ball brought out the worst in people. After Nathan upbraided an opposing player's mother for razzing Max's team mercilessly during a consolation game at the 2006 national tournament in Florida, she told him to get his "faggot ass out of here." The tiff escalated at game's end as Nathan and Erin were chased into the parking lot and had to hide in their car. Eventually tempers eased, "but it hurt [Dave and Nathan] and really pissed me off," Max says. "My parents are my blood."

Max took Dave and Nathan aside and said, "You know people say that stuff. So what? You know I love you." He was 14. It wasn't the last time he would seem to be the oldest soul in the room.

Playing high school ball was far cozier than AAU. Max and his family felt welcome and protected from the first game of his freshman year, on the road at Oakton, Va. Carter heard some off-color chants about Max's dads, and the home crowd called Max "Whoopi Goldberg" and taunted, "We smell *fresh*-man!" the first time he brought up the ball. After he drained a three-pointer, the Woodson fans responded, "He's *our* freshman!" That's how it started: unconditional love.

And why not? Max had already been tabbed as a Maryland prospect in the eighth grade; he was the school's best player since Tommy Amaker, who would star at Duke. His sophomore season he averaged 14 points and was compared with Villanova sensation Scottie Reynolds. Max was too short and not quite fast enough for Kentucky or North Carolina, but his phone still hummed: Penn State, Minnesota, Boston University, his pick of mid-majors. It was all lining up now: *official visits . . . D-I . . . the NCAAs, and, yeah, no doubt about it, the NBA. . . .*

Then that fantasy died. Bad enough that Max missed the vital AAU showcases before junior year when his left knee required minor surgery. Three weeks before the season opener he was wheeled off the court on a stretcher after he came down from a routine layup, bumped another player and hurt his right knee. Doctors couldn't tell the extent of the damage until they went in, but Max knew a meniscus tear would end his season. Junior year is *the* year, recruiting-wise. Miss that, and your stock plummets.

NOW HEAR THIS
Lenox (center) is the team's chief motivator, sought out by all players for his advice and encouragement.

Dave and Nathan were there when the anesthesia began to wear off. "It was a tear," they said, and Max cried until he passed out. When he woke up again minutes later, still foggy, he'd forgotten. He asked again. "It was a tear," they repeated, and he cried until he passed out. Soon enough he came to. Again he asked. "It was a tear," they said.

Max didn't pass out. He did cry, though.

NOW CAME the recalibration. Max played just a few minutes that season, in a playoff game, and the phone calls stopped. He had built his entire self-image around ball. He had been so cocky with the smaller schools—*Yeah, I'll get back to you*—but now even they went dark on him. "Everything was gone," he says.

Left alone with his thoughts, he found he couldn't stand the company. "So what am I? I'm a nobody," he says. "That year was really rough for me. I did awful in school. I was pretty antisocial." But even mired in a deep funk, Max absorbed reminders that life wasn't all about him. In the spring of 2009, Dave was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer that demanded radical surgery. Driving home from practice one day, Dave told Max about the cancer and asked if he had any worries.

"I want to know what *you're* afraid of," Max said. "Tell me what scares you. That'll help me."

Such role reversal was typical: Sometimes Dave and Nathan felt as if Max was raising them. He always gravitated to girls, so his parents' early concern wasn't his. And their lifestyle was so buttoned-down, so lacking in rainbow flags and pride parades, so dull, that it seemed as if what the world called *gay* and what Max lived with were very different things. "I'm as straight as they come, and I don't like gay people who push it in other people's faces," Max says. "It makes my parents look bad. You know your stereotype gay person who's flamboyant and wearing pink? The stereotype makes me mad. That's not who all gay people are."

Yet when he talks about the summer day that year, on Martha's Vineyard, when everyone wore white and Dave and Nathan were married on the back porch of their rental house, Max's voice cracks. "The most pride I've had in my family—ever," he says, "just knowing that they finally got to do what they've been trying to do for a long time, and the world is slowly accepting this great thing that I have in my life. Even though before, I thought, *We're really a family*, that was like a message to the world: F--- you, we are a family. And by *your* standard, too, not just ours."

It ended up being a good senior year. Dave's surgery was successful, and Max came back with his best season: 22.8 points per game, 6.1 rebounds, 3.7 assists, 2.5 steals, league player of the year, first-team all-state; he dropped 44 on rival Fairfax High, where his girlfriend was the manager. Senior Night, when the graduating players walk to midcourt with their parents before the game, had been on the family's mind for years. Nathan had been dreading it, feeling guilty. They

TIM CLAYTON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

MAX LENOX

had never pushed it in anybody's face. How would the opposing team's fans, and the Woodson kids who didn't know, react? His and Dave's sexual orientation was *their* fight, not Max's. Dave asked his son: Do you want it to be just you and Erin?

Max insisted that all of them go or none. He started crying just before the P.A. announcer called his name. Added to so many other factors—his comeback, his love for Woodson, the 1,000th career point he had scored a few nights before—the moment overwhelmed him. Then Nathan took one of Max's arms and Dave the other, and with Erin alongside they walked into the noise and lights. The crowd stood, cheering, and Max saw friends crying too, and felt his dads' pride and thought, *This is who I am. Like it or not: We're here.*

In truth, he was also on edge. Max still had no idea where—or even if—he'd play basketball again. Most mid-major guard slots were filled by the time he proved his knees were solid, and coaches wondered if he'd lost some of his fearlessness, half a step, the potential to compete at the next level. Max had always skated academically, testing well but barely maintaining a C average; now it caught up with him. April came, and schools he would have once dismissed all backed off at the same time.

Max hit rock bottom. A Woodson connection provided an option: Fork Union Military Academy, a Baptist boarding school in rural Virginia. Never mind that coach Fletcher Arritt had spent more than 40 years at FUMA reshaping more than 200 egocentric, unhappy or plain underbaked prospects into Division I freshmen. FUMA prohibited homosexual acts, mandated thrice-weekly chapel attendance and didn't allow what Arritt calls the Five P's—press, parents, posse, perfume (girls) and penguins (bad refs). Cellphones were banned. It seemed the worst match for someone like Max.

When Carter, Max's AAU coach, called the then 70-year-old Arritt to give him a scouting report, he said, "Coach, I want to be honest with you: He has two dads."

"What does that mean?" Arritt said.

"They're gay," Carter said, thinking, *Here it comes.*

"I don't care," Arritt replied. "Is he a good kid?"

IT'S AT this point in his story that Max Lenox begins toting up all his second chances. He hated Fork Union's isolation and strict rules, but the academy taught him organization and time management; for the first time he hauled in straight A's. And he'd never met a man like Arritt, a coach who cared far more about his players than himself, who could get a bunch of "stars" to ignore personal stats and play for one another, or for him. "He changed my life," Max says. "There are no other words."

Half a dozen kids from that FUMA squad went on to play D-I. "One of the best teams we've had," Arritt says. "We were 26–7, and Lenox was responsible for it because he gave the team stability and structure—and he never let up." Of course, Max was a prototype Arritt point guard, less athletic than tough and savvy; the time he dived twice on the floor on one defensive possession and bounced the ball out-of-bounds off a beleaguered opponent's leg, remains "one of the most unbelievable plays I've ever seen," Arritt says.

FULL HOUSE
After adopting Max (with ball), Dave and Nathan (with dog Jordan) completed the family with Erin.

The coach's longstanding relationship with Army allowed Max and West Point to get acquainted. Nine other small D-I schools dangled offers in front of Max, but if injury had taught him anything, it was that no conventional basketball program was to be trusted. What if his knee went out again? Army's new coach, Zach Spiker, sold Max on helping to return the program to the success it enjoyed under Bob Knight and Mike Krzyzewski. Besides, nobody at West Point loses an athletic scholarship. There are none.

Though Don't Ask, Don't Tell was still in effect, parents are nearly irrelevant at West Point. Spiker visited the Lenox home; he didn't ask, and nobody told, but all involved figured West Point had never seen a family like this. What of it? Spiker needed a point guard. Max was gung ho. The media guide that appeared just after the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell listed Max's parents as "Nathan Merrells and Dave Lenox." No one seemed to notice.

It was just as well. His first semester, Max opened the season a starter, shed the discipline he'd learned at FUMA, failed English and math and earned a D in psychology. After Christmas break an academic board told him he'd have to repeat the failed classes and push back graduation a year.

"He got hit over the head with a two-by-four," Spiker says.

"I was pretty grateful," Lenox says. "Not everyone gets a lot of second chances."

"Then," Spiker says, "*I* hit him over the head."

With the team 5–7 and Lenox's mind still on his academic peril, Spiker pulled him from the starting lineup. Despite that, Lenox threw up the spinning last-second layup in February that sent the home game against Navy into double overtime and an eventual Army victory. He still tallied the most assists by an Army freshman in 11 years and was named to the Patriot League all-rookie team. He didn't know, however, that Spiker had stockpiled several hungry guards at West Point's prep school.

Over the next two years, as the Black Knights put together consecutive 15-win

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MAX LENOX

seasons for the first time in 34 years, Lenox saw his minutes halved, quartered, then nearly eliminated. He considered transferring, but something beyond the prestige of a USMA degree kept him from quitting. He recalibrated again.

"I learned so much about myself that I didn't see happening anywhere else," Lenox says. "I learned that I can influence people. I felt like I could change a lot of lives—without basketball. I could be a leader that soldiers and America need. I looked at my life, at what people said about me and what West Point had taught me, and I thought, *This is where I need to be. And if I have to sacrifice basketball for it, so be it.*"

The message West Point drills into each future officer is, "Care for your soldiers." No Black Knight does that more than Lenox. During last season's worst moments he got his teammates hyped for practice, cajoled and counseled them one by one. During games he would tell the guard who took his job, Dylan Cox, "Our battles in practice are harder than this: I know you can do it! I believe in you!"

"When I'm frustrated on the court, he's the one I go to," Cox says.

"Max will ask how your life's going," says Tanner Omlid, the sophomore forward. "And he doesn't ask just, 'How's your family?' He says, 'How's your dad, Keith? How's your mom, Allison?' Last year when my mom got breast cancer, Max was the only guy I talked to about it. He truly cares about me. He wants what's best for everyone."

THIS FALL Max Lenox came back stronger than ever. In his final season, attrition has given him one last basketball shot: He's expected to log far more minutes as Cox's backup. But his center of gravity has shifted. That's what happens to 22-year-old men when all goes right. They grow up.

For most of his life, Lenox kept curiosity about his roots on a back burner. He was content; he didn't want to hurt his parents. But he always knew he was from Philadelphia and kept an eye on the city, especially after Dave told him he had enough brothers to fill out a starting lineup. The Eagles have always been his team. Five years ago, when Dave drove him into Philly for a game, Max craned his neck and asked, "Where are my brothers?"

Dave and Nathan had talked with Max about his birth mother and siblings only when he asked. He didn't ask much. That caught up with them a few years ago at Thanksgiving when Carter, who considers the two men his dearest friends, turned to Max and blurted, "You were a crack baby." The room went church quiet.

"You never told me that," Max told his dads. Had a shovel been handy, Carter would have dug a hole and jumped in.

"I was kind of pissed that my parents would tell other people before they told me," Max says.

When a reporter first asked, in August, if Max was interested in contacting his birth mother, he was cool to the idea. But by October he'd warmed some. "I'd be interested to hear what she had to say," he said. "I wouldn't have a problem with meeting, but I wasn't going to go out of my way to find her. How about this? You go and talk to her and then tell me the situation."

A week later Lenox drove the 2½ hours down from West Point, alone, to watch the Eagles play the Giants. He arrived with plenty of time to kill. "I was driving through all these poorer areas and, I was like, *I wonder where I would've been?*" Lenox says. "I was there all day, just looking. I was still thinking, *Do I want to meet her? Or keep moving along in my life?*"

At the time no one in the Lenox clan knew that Corrine Cottom had been dead 14 years. Or that Max's oldest brother, Corry, allegedly threatened his mom with a knife that January day in 2000; that he then lit a couch on fire; that after hurtling out the window he sat on the sidewalk sobbing, "My mom's dead!"; that he was convicted of third-degree murder and jailed; that he died at 27, soon after his release. Or that, for the last five years of her life, Corrine seemed to have been clean.

"She was good; she was functional," says Pamela Cottom, Corrine's oldest sister. "She took care of her kids: They ate, they weren't starving, they were dressed. They didn't look like they were lacking anything, like while she was on drugs."

Pamela wants this to be known too: Her sister wasn't just a crackhead. "She had a heart. If she had something to give, she gave it." You can feel a bit of that rising off the adoption questionnaire she filled out in 1992.

"Love sports—to watch [and] play," she wrote. "Varsity basketball, like to read. . . ." Asked if she wanted Max to know anything about her, she wrote, "Always welcome to come here." Would she want her son to contact her once he became an adult? "Yes—would like—definitely."

LATE ONE October morning, while walking the stone bridge at West Point's Lusk Reservoir, Dave and Nathan told Max about Corrine's death. His feelings ran from sadness to relief to loss to closure to a puzzled, flat nothing. He had never known the woman, but West Point had drilled into him that each life is precious—and now an idea from long ago had died along with her. The surrendered child always wonders: Will I ever meet her, see my face in hers? And what of Max's brothers? Some of them are still alive, somewhere. Maybe someday. . . . *Maybe.*

So the fathers watched the news sink in, ready to offer a hug or soft words or anything else Max needed, waiting as long as it took for their son to talk it out, because sometimes waiting—just being there—is the whole point. Max appreciated the gesture, that they stood ready even now to save him, but he was hardly surprised. That's how it has always been. That's what blood does.□

Even on the bench, Lenox thought, West Point "is where I need to be. And if I have to sacrifice basketball for it, so be it."

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Kobe vs. Kismet

→ BY LEE JENKINS

George Mikan began his pro career with the Chicago American Gears of the National Basketball League, and from the outset he was unstoppable. The 6' 10" center averaged 16.5 points as a rookie in 1946, carried Chicago to the championship and transformed basketball into a big man's game. But before Mikan's second season Gears owner Maurice White pulled the franchise to form a separate league. The new circuit collapsed after a month, and players were distributed back into the 11-team NBL. According to NBA.com, each had a 9% chance of landing Mikan. The Minneapolis Lakers were the lucky ones.

That was in 1947, but it started a pattern that continued almost unabated for more than 60 years. The Lakers were bold. They were shrewd. They were also immeasurably lucky. When Gail Goodrich left L.A. for New Orleans in 1976, the Lakers received as compensation the Jazz's first-round pick in '79, which happened to be the year New Orleans finished with the NBA's worst record, and which also happened to be the year Magic Johnson left Michigan State. The Lakers still had to win a coin flip for the No. 1 pick. Naturally it fell their way.

Three years later L.A. made a less heralded move, packaging Don Ford for the Cavaliers' first-rounder in 1982. Of course that turned out to be the year Cleveland had the worst record and the Lakers won another coin toss for the rights to James Worthy. The franchise was charmed. Every time it needed a center, some celebrated giant became available: Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Shaquille O'Neal, Pau Gasol. Obviously Hollywood was a lure and owner Jerry Buss a visionary. It took scouting genius to target Kobe Bryant in the 1996 draft. It also took dumb luck for 12 clubs to pass on him and for the Hornets to trade him.

After winning 16 championships, including five in the past 15 years, the Lakers might now be the worst NBA team west of Philadelphia. They started this season 0–4 for the first time since their Minneapolis days, with by far the league's worst scoring margin (–68 points). Theories abound as to why: Bryant's alienating free agents with his coarse bedside manner, a front office adrift since Buss's death 20 months ago, a new CBA that punishes excessive spending. The Lakers have made three dubious coaching hires in a row, let two frontcourt pillars bolt for nothing and invested ludicrous sums in players pushing 40.

They've also had six decades of overwhelmingly good fortune fly back in their faces. In this age of narratives versus analytics, no one wants to hear about luck. But consider the deep freeze that has enveloped the Lakers in the past four years. The commissioner vetoed a trade for Chris Paul. Bryant tore his Achilles, then fractured his knee. Steve Nash broke his leg in his second game for L.A.—though he held up longer in purple and gold than rookie forward Julius Randle, drafted this year with the No. 7 pick. Randle broke his leg on opening night; he and Nash, who suffered a back injury during training camp, are already done for the year, and the Lakers, who lost a league-high 319 games to injury last season, are threatening the mark again. It's as though the Clipper Curse had been transferred down the street in lieu of Paul.

There are many reasons for the **Lakers' decline.** Chief among them: six decades of overwhelmingly good fortune are now flying back in their faces.

Unless you are a body-language expert, in which case Bryant will make a fascinating case study, there is no reason to watch the Lakers until lottery night. They sent their first-rounder to Phoenix for Nash, though they retain the choice if it's among the top five, a distinct possibility. The Lakers could be underdogs in every game through Thanksgiving. But the TV networks will keep beaming them down, a dark comedy featuring abominable defense and an inexplicable attachment to midrange jumpers.

The Lakers can't rebuild in peace, but they are doing what a lousy NBA team should: sinking to the bottom rather than retreating to the middle, resisting the temptation to offer second-tier free agents long-term contracts, keeping salary-cap space open. If they are tanking, it's in the most socially acceptable way, with Jeremy Lin and Carlos Boozer instead of D-Leaguers galore. The Lakers are waiting for their luck to turn. As they've learned, it will. □

What's the luckiest franchise in sports? Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@SI_LeeJenkins**

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